

# **Chuck Palahniuk: Beyond the Body**

A Representation of Gender in *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters* and  
*Diary*

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## Abstract

The main focus of this essay will be to discuss how Chuck Palahniuk presents gender in three of his books: *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Diary*, and how his presentation of gender often involves the deconstruction of such terms. My aim is to show how Palahniuk deals with different aspects of gender in American society, be it the dichotomous relationship between femininity/masculinity and gay/straight, and also to show how his writing unearths an underlying critique of American society as a whole. The chapters will focus on the main characters of the three novels; depicting the characters' journey to achieving both physical and spiritual freedom, and thus authenticity, by deconstructing normative notions of gender. The binary categories of gender have come to serve as a means of structuring society in a convenient and simple way, yet complicating the situation for those who fall on the outside of such categories. My aim, then, is to show how the shunning of the binary gender categories ultimately leads to reconnection between humans and a restoration of individuality for the characters. By going beyond the limitations of the body, Palahniuk's texts opens up an exploration of a world that goes beyond categorization, labels, class and race, thus displaying the ultimate beauty in difference. The three chapters are structured around several aspects of each novel that I claim are the main arguments used by Palahniuk to represent his view on gender in American society.



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Kjersti Jacobsen

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*For those who couldn't be here,  
And for those that still are.*

## Introduction

In so many ways, these places – support groups, twelve-step recovery groups, demolition derbies – they’ve come to serve the role that organized religion used to. We used to go to church to reveal the worst aspects of ourselves, our sins. To tell our stories. To be recognized. To be forgiven. This ritual was our way to stay connected to people, and to resolve our anxiety before it could take us so far from humanity that we would be lost...even the lonely act of writing becomes an excuse to be around people. In turn, the people fuel the storytelling. Alone. Together. Fact. Fiction. It’s a cycle. It works, but only if you don’t get stuck too long in any one place.<sup>1</sup>

As a human living in this modern world, you tend to end up alone. Before one had to walk to the neighbor’s house in order to enter a dialogue, now you can remain immobile and simply press a button to communicate. It has made things easier; the Facebook-revolution and technology boost of smart phones have certainly improved how human beings interact with each other and have opened up the possibility to communicate globally – to connect beyond geographical, physical and emotional boundaries. But has it brought us closer?

In this thesis I will examine three novels in which the main character is trying to escape a lonely existence by challenging the binary gender categories in order to reconnect with the community. With the proliferation of Internet access in the last twenty years, the themes of identity, identity formation and gender have been questioned. One would think a larger access to information and knowledge about other people would stimulate the notion of greater diversity as something positive, yet, it seems as if greater access has contributed to a narrower perception of identity, or worse, as Kimmel articulates, an uncertainty about who we are: “On what grand and luminous mythological figure does contemporary humanity attempt to model itself? The question is embarrassing. Nobody knows.”<sup>2</sup> The last decade’s feminist movement and the pioneering from feminist scholars have put gender in focus, and the importance of it in regards to the shaping of society and the individual. Scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler have contributed to bringing gender into public view and scrutinizing what powers control the governing of gender, establishing that the boundaries of the gender dichotomy are constantly moving and shifting. With his post-modern satirical look on contemporary American society, Chuck Palahniuk makes his contribution to the ongoing gender debate by deconstructing normative notions of gender

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<sup>1</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, Foreword to *Stranger Than Fiction* (Anchor Books: New York, 2004), xix-xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, Introduction to *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2006), 1.

through his portrayal of characters that are not bound by the social laws that follow sexual identity. This thesis focuses on Palahniuk's depiction of gender, although he himself considers his novels to be about anything but that: "If you consider all my novels, you'll find gender...become[s] unimportant."<sup>3</sup> It is because of this aspect that I will argue that his work becomes an interesting contribution to gender discourse; Palahniuk's books definitely deal with gender, but the portrayal of his characters takes the reader beyond the boundaries of genders, demonstrating how individual freedom, community and love grow out of a society that does not uphold the social laws of separation.

In many ways, gender and the body are very much in focus in today's American society. With the discussions of the legalization of same sex marriage, the topic of anatomy, biology and categories becomes relevant: What is a man? What constitutes a woman? Are you a man solely because of your anatomy? Is it really that simple? In her TED<sup>4</sup> talk "Is Anatomy Destiny?", Alice Dreger, a noted historian on human anatomy and advocate for intersexed individuals, says that sex is much more complex than simply making the determination based on whether you have testes or a uterus.<sup>5</sup> She comments that our society has a romanticized idea of what a woman and man is, and whenever someone challenges these views we are left startled and uncomfortable. These individuals, who are not standard male or female, are called intersexed, which means they challenge societal norms regarding sex and the romantic picture society has created of gender. Dreger comments that doctors try to "normalize" the infants that are born with "abnormal" sex, not because it is in their best interest regarding their health, but because they threaten our social categories and what society considers "normal." Our society depends on those categories because we have built our world around them, thus when someone challenges those social norms, the foundation is shaken. Science, and the knowledge that there are so many deviations from the "normal" categories of male and female, Dreger argues, has forced us to "come to the point where we have to admit, that nature does not draw the lines for us between male and female, or between male and intersex and female and

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<sup>3</sup> Matt Kavanaugh, "Of Failed Romance, Writer's Malpractice, and Prose for the Nose: A Conversation with Chuck Palahniuk," in *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, ed. Jeffrey A. Sartain (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 184.

<sup>4</sup> TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design. It is an organization that arranges conferences for scientists, scholars and other entrepreneurs to come together and share their ideas and research.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Dreger, "Is Anatomy Destiny?" TED Talks (Video), filmed December, 2010.

Posted June, 2011. Accessed March 27, 2011

[http://www.ted.com/talks/alice\\_dreger\\_is\\_anatomy\\_destiny.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/alice_dreger_is_anatomy_destiny.html).

intersex, we actually draw that line on nature.”<sup>6</sup> Nature is not constant, but ever changing. Our whole body regenerates in seven years;<sup>7</sup> the “I” that I am now is not the same “I” I was physically 2 or 4 or 20 years ago, the body shrinks, expands, shrivels, regenerates and expands throughout life. Why can we not think of gender the same way?

There are, however, scholars who believe sex, sexuality and gender are as fluid and changing as our bodies. Scholars within the field of gender, such as Judith Butler, Kate Bornstein and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, claim that the power to determine gender lies outside of one’s individual control, and believe gender should be based not on biology, but determined by the subject itself. Butler discusses these issues in her books *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender*, where she critiques society’s unrealistic notions of categories for defining identity and sex, and discusses who governs sex.<sup>8</sup> Butler argues for a socially constructed gender, where gender is created by a set of performative and ritualized acts performed by the subject. Butler explains that seeing the gendered body as performative suggests that “it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality,”<sup>9</sup> meaning the acts the body performs form its “true gender.” Butler uses the examples of drag performance and cross-dressing as examples of instances where the “distinction between inner and outer psychic space...mocks the expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity.”<sup>10</sup> By this, Butler sees gender as a socially constructed identity that is “tenuously constituted in time” through a “stylized repetition of acts,” acts which comprise the illusion of “an abiding gendered self.”<sup>11</sup> According to Butler’s theories, and also part of Beauvoir’s theories, gender and sex are two separate entities that function independently of each other. Sex does not cause gender, and gender cannot be understood to reflect sex, thus suggesting that “sexed bodies can be occasion for a number of different genders.”<sup>12</sup> This view gives room for those who get left out of the binary categories, and restores the connection between humans based on humanity rather than falsely constructed entities.

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<sup>6</sup> Alice Dreger, “Is Anatomy Destiny?”, 00:06:28.

<sup>7</sup> Stanford Institute for Medicine, “Research,” 2013, accessed April 17, 2013, <http://stemcell.stanford.edu/research/>.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990; rpt., New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

These same notions are expressed through the characters that Palahniuk uses, which places his work and ideas into an already active discourse. Through this thesis, I suggest that Chuck Palahniuk makes an important and interesting contribution to gender discourse through his use of characters that challenge societal norms regarding sex, sexuality, gender and identity. As I have mentioned previously, Palahniuk has said explicitly that his books are not about gender, however, this is exactly what makes his novels interesting in regards to gender. His characters do not define themselves by the gender laws, but rather, go beyond their bodies' limitations, and also society's boundaries, in regards to sex, sexuality and identity and thus achieves spiritual freedom and authenticity. Dreger argues that at some point we must go beyond our anatomy and our bodies to define identity and gender, because it is too complicated to simply just split humanity into two. This categorization only leads to separation and disconnection between us, something Palahniuk touches upon in his works by portraying outcasts who try to get back into the community. It is only through their shunning of traditional gender categorization that they find redemption and freedom, and can reconnect with community again.

In this thesis, I will be examining three novels written by Palahniuk, and the novels I have chosen are *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Diary*. A comparison between the three works has not been done before, especially not in the light of gender, and I am of the opinion that together they represent interesting ideas Palahniuk has regarding gender in American society. The novels each deal with different aspects of gender, be it femininity/masculinity or the dichotomous relationship between gay/straight, and they all present characters that are trapped within the bounds of conformity. To escape the said boundaries of the binary categories and ultimately spiritual destruction, each main character sets out on a quest to break out of the lonely existence and return to the community as an autonomous individual. I will argue that Palahniuk presents characters that go beyond gender, or as I like to call it "beyond the body," by portraying characters that break free of society's gender boundaries. I will also argue that a deeper understanding of Palahniuk's presentation of alienated characters unearths an underlying critique of contemporary American society.

In this introduction I will start with a brief presentation of Chuck Palahniuk's biography and proceed to discuss his authorship, his books' publication and reception. I will also be discussing his writing style and some of the prominent themes he addresses in his novels, as well as the scholarly interest that has arisen around his work. The scholarly work that has been done on Palahniuk's work is limited, although it is a growing field. I will address the scholarly attention Palahniuk's works received and comment on critique he has

been given. In regards to the scholarly work that is being presented, I will highlight the importance of gender in Palahniuk's authorship and argue its significance, while finishing off the introduction by connecting each of the novels relevance to the thesis statement.

**“Before all that...There was just a short story.”<sup>13</sup>**

### **The Man, His Books and Reception**

Before all of the fame that Palahniuk's stories brought him, he was just a normal guy growing up in Burbank, Washington during the 60s. His writing actually started with journalism, graduating from the University of Oregon with a BA in Journalism in 1986,<sup>14</sup> and working for a local newspaper while attending college. It was not until the 90s when he officially moved to Portland and attended writer's workshops hosted by Tom Spanbauer, that he began writing fiction. It was Tom Spanbauer, Portland, joining the Cacophony Society, working as a diesel mechanic, a dish washer, movie projectionist, volunteering at homeless shelters, and at hospices as an escort for terminally ill patients which has shaped most of his stories, both fictional and non-fictional.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most important aspect of his writing, he comments in *Stranger than Fiction*, is a notion quite central for all his works – the ability to reconnect through stories: “Most of the reason I write is because once a week it brought me together with other people. This was in a workshop taught by a published writer – Tom Spanbauer – around his kitchen table on Thursday nights.”<sup>16</sup> While providing a sense of community, togetherness, and sparking an itch for writing, it was Tom Spanbauer that lead Palahniuk onto the path of transgressional fiction with a minimalist writing style. Transgressional fiction seeks to shock, disturb or frighten the reader by dealing with subject matters that are considered taboo, such as sex, drugs, violence, incest and crime. The genre usually portrays a main character that seeks to break free from societal norms, in albeit unusual ways. His books do indeed shock, as several or all of them present a character's escape from society's stronghold by either faking their own deaths by choking, shoot off their own face, develop multiple personalities or hijack a plane. His books create even further chill in their audiences because of the writing style Palahniuk applies. Taught by Spanbauer, the minimalist style is usually stripped down to the

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<sup>13</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: W. W Norton & Company, 1996), 212-213.

<sup>14</sup> “Chuck Palahniuk F.A.Q,” last modified 2012, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/author/faq#biographical-6>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*, xvii.

bare necessities of the text and different elements are employed to draw the reader's attention to details and involve him/her on a "gut level." Perhaps what Palahniuk applies most to his work is something called "going on the body;" providing the reader with "tasty, smelly, touchable details" that produce a physical reaction in the reader, and involves the reader on "a gut level."<sup>17</sup> The best example of his application of "going on the body" revolves around a short story called "Guts" which appeared in the novel *Haunted*, published in 2005. He read the short story to his audience while on book tour promoting his novel *Diary*, and it was reported that as many as 40 people had fainted while listening to the story.<sup>18</sup> As an extension on his technique of "going on the body," my thesis will discuss how Palahniuk's characters go "beyond the body" in order to challenge traditional gender norms in society and identity formation.

His literary success started with *Fight Club*; a story of a man discovering new meaning to his tiresome life through fighting with other men. It started out as just a seven-page short story, published in an anthology called *The Pursuit of Happiness*. After adding some additional stories from his friend's lives, the story evolved into a book in 1996 that went on to win several literary awards and become a top-grossing movie starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton.<sup>19</sup> The movie's success created a phenomenon that spread throughout the United States, proving the story's massive impact on American society, and also propelling Palahniuk's authorship. The popularity secured the novel and its author legendary status, and also gathered its own official fan base website called The Cult. At the website, fans congregate to report from book tours, update on Palahniuk's newest books, organize happenings and visit lively forums. Even a decade after Palahniuk's success with *Fight Club*, his body of works keeps expanding. Only 3 years after the release of *Fight Club*, Palahniuk published two books – *Survivor and Invisible Monsters* – which were quickly followed by *Choke* (2001), *Lullaby* (2002), *Diary* (2003), *Haunted* (2005), *Rant* (2007), *Snuff* (2008), *Pygmy* (2009), *Tell-All* (2010), *Damned* (2011) and *Invisible Monsters Remix* in 2012. His most recent published work is a short story called "Phoenix" which has sparked a lot of interest, not only in his cult following on [chuckpalahniuk.net](http://chuckpalahniuk.net), but has also become the number

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Glaister, "I dare you," Saturday 13 March 2004 (Article), accessed March 2, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/mar/13/fiction.chuckpalahniuk>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 214-217.

1 Kindle single on Amazon.<sup>20</sup> He is currently working on a sequel for his novel *Damned* (2011) called *Doomed*, and a novel called *Beautiful You*, expected to be released in 2014.

Yet, something that is often the case with authors whose status has grown out of one pioneering work is the contemplation on whether or not the work following *Fight Club* is sustainable. Although his books have become immensely popular with the worldwide public, the popularity has seemed a turn-off to scholars. Because *Fight Club* was so provoking, many scholars concentrated and still focus on just the starting novel, but have lost interest in Palahniuk's other works. Others argued that his books never gained new territory as he was "rewriting the same book over and over again."<sup>21</sup> One reviewer claims he "effects to attack the shallow, simplistic, dehumanizing culture...by writing shallow, simplistic, dehumanizing fiction," while Maloney categorizes his fiction as "shtick," meaning it is the intellectual equivalent of "watching Gene Simmons spit blood and fire onstage."<sup>22</sup> A lot of the criticism that is directed towards him stems from the perception that his writing horrifies, disgusts and shocks but without the literary greatness and deeper significance that more serious writers have. However, in some circles in academia, Palahniuk's authorship is thriving, judging by countless articles, dissertations, papers and theses. There have also been several essay collections published on his works, the first being *You Do Not Talk About Fight Club: I Am Jack's Completely Unauthorized Essay Collection*, analyses of both novel and film, and the more recent *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk* written by Jeffrey Sartain, which aims to expand the critical work done on all of Palahniuk's works, including his most recent books (up until 2009).<sup>23</sup> The last essay collection is from 2012 called *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, which aims to also expand the scholarly work done on Palahniuk's authorship, but also to highlight the significance and impact his stylistic and thematic choices have had on American literature, which is also the purpose for this thesis. These essays will be my primary theory texts as they deal specifically

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<sup>20</sup> "Announcement," posted March 3, 2013 by Dennis, co-creator of the site, accessed March 3, 2013, <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/news/phoenix-is-now-the-1-kindle-single-on-amazon>.

<sup>21</sup> Matt Thorne, "Rant, by Chuck Palahniuk: Trapped in the Goth Lifestyle?" Independent Online March 13, 2007, accessed April 12, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/rant-by-chuck-palahniuk-448670.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Cynthia Kuhn et. al, introduction to *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, ed. Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Robin (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Sartain et. al, *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, ed. Jeffrey Sartain (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).



with Palahniuk's texts and his authorship, however, I will be connecting his ideas to other significant scholars from gender studies, such as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir.

Though there is disagreement on Palahniuk's literary merits, and whether or not his works will stand the same tests of time like Jack Kerouac's, or F. Scott Fitzgerald's remains to be seen. It is however likely that his characters will continue to capture the audience, especially to those who feel anger, confusion and frustration by being left out in the margins of a society with old, broken rules and few guideposts. His novels capture how we feel as a result of living in a postmodern world: the "instinctively, deadening, regressive, and potentially dangerous symptoms of postmodern life that trap us into narrow subjectives."<sup>24</sup> However, as Kuhn and Robin note that Palahniuk's writing is more than "merely a disconcerting product of a distressing timer in history,"<sup>25</sup> pointing out that his themes and methods branch out into several genres such as contemporary literature, classic romantic literature, postmodern literature and the American Gothic and Horror genres. His use of style associates him with Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver, while his use of existentialism, Baudrillardian simulacra and chaos compares him to "high" postmodernists such as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace.<sup>26</sup> Also, his use of satire and the attack on individuality, creativity and sense of purpose links his work to Kurt Vonnegut and Ambrose Bierce. The connections are extensive, which speaks volumes for his novels' literary significance and importance. However, as Kuhn and Robin points out, readers may still be shocked by the violence and the grotesque nature of Palahniuk's characters, yet "as fierce and violent as they may seem...Palahniuk's work may ultimately prove to comprise an apt literary reflection of a deteriorating contemporary world,"<sup>27</sup> and through his stories and characters the reader is brought "to a site of release where only books can go."<sup>28</sup>

## **Diagnosing America:**

### **Theory, Themes and the Ailments of Gender**

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<sup>24</sup> Kuhn, Introduction, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Slade, "On Mutilation: The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk's Fiction," in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 65.

As Christina Angel mentions in regards to Palahniuk's thematic usage, "his novels do not simply reflect what we wish to see, but open doors to what we wish not to see but perhaps need to."<sup>29</sup> Through his characters' adventures of self-mutilation and self-destruction, the novels comment on bigger themes such as existentialism, postmodern society, capitalism, minimalism, gender, sexuality, religion and morals. Palahniuk has commented himself that he writes about things that "pisses him off,"<sup>30</sup> involving the reader on a "gut level" from the very first sentence. Palahniuk has said that his writing is based on personal trauma, but Steffen Hantke notes that thematically his writing becomes symbols of "a larger pathology underlying American culture."<sup>31</sup> These ideas echo Eduardo Mendieta's notions in his essay "Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk," where he argues for Palahniuk's writing being based on the desire for social critique.<sup>32</sup> His characters suffer the ailments of a society heavily plagued by consumerism, de-industrialization and "McDonalization," and offers them a cure in the form of deviance to retain the health of the individual. I, too, agree that Palahniuk's writing functions as social critique, and have come to the conclusion that one of the ailments that American society suffers from, which Palahniuk addresses, is normative notions of gender identity.

*Fight Club* is particularly interesting to study much because it was Palahniuk's first published book, but also because of the tension it created amongst scholars and his readers. Even though Palahniuk never intended his books to be about gender, scholars and reviewers have tended to focus on exactly that, especially in regards to *Fight Club*. Much of this has to do with the context in which the novel arose. There seemed to be a shift in attitudes amongst young boys growing up in the 1990s; they were categorized as lazy, lost, unmotivated and apathetic to life. Many scholars had addressed this problem, claiming the American society

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<sup>29</sup> Christina Angel, "This Theatre of Mass Destruction: Medieval Morality and Jacobean Tragedy in Palahniuk's Novels," in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 60.

<sup>30</sup> "Chuck Palahniuk F.A.Q.," accessed March 13, 2013, <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/author/faq#writing-1>.

<sup>31</sup> Steffen Hantke, "Blood in the Bookstore Floor: Chuck Palahniuk and the Case of the Fainting Reader," in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 198.

<sup>32</sup> Eduardo Mendieta, "Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk," *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 29, Number 2, October 2005, pp. 394-408 (Article), Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press, 395.  
DOI: 10.1353/phl.2005.0029

was plagued by a “crisis in masculinity.”<sup>33</sup> The times were changing, and alongside the ongoing push for feminism as a result of sex revolutions in the 1960s and the rising rates of women entering the workforce, societal structures were changing. The once clear lines between men and women were becoming blurred, and men were given unclear rules as to how to live their lives. *Fight Club* wrote itself right into this situation; complicating the question of what gender is, and more specifically what masculinity is. What does it mean to be male in today’s American society? Scholars quickly following the debate were Susan Faludi with her book *Stiffed*, concerning what has become of the modern man and claiming there was a “masculine crisis” in American society, and Michael Kimmel with *Manhood in America: A cultural history*, regarding masculinity in the American society claiming the same “crisis,” as the result of a staggering, corporate economy and a loss of traditional male ideals. The novel echoes these notions, which is perhaps why the book resonated so well with the young men who read the book. The novel provided a solution to their mundane lives, and offered a role model who embodied the power of their fathers, who claimed his place and individuality through anarchy. The men find solace and connection through violence and aggression, claiming their individuality by exploring limits and pushing themselves out of their comfort zones. However, the fighting and destruction in *Fight Club*, or any of Palahniuk’s other books, is not meant to represent violence; the self-destruction and pain each character goes through is a means to redemption and reconnectedness to each other. The acts of self-mutilation and pain do not represent cruelty or violence, but are represented as something needed in order to regain a sense of humanity in a society where humanity is lost.

However, in my research, I claim the novel addresses more than just masculinity. Was the focus solely just on the men? What about femininity? What has happened to gender as a whole in postmodern American society? On this side of the spectrum, Cynthia Kuhn argues in her essay “I am Marla’s Monstrous Wound” for the importance of the female lead Marla, and highlighting both genders in their ongoing battle of the sexes.<sup>34</sup> This was more the approach I wanted to take; reflecting on both genders and how they were represented in the text, while examining what Palahniuk was critiquing by portraying gender in this particular way. The focus is on masculinity AND femininity, and how those two are caricatured to the

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<sup>33</sup> Waller R. Newell, “The Crisis of Manliness,” August 3, 1998, VOL. 3, NO. 3, accessed March 23, 2013,

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Protected/Articles/000/000/009/179jpxdx.asp#>.

<sup>34</sup> Cynthia Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound: *Fight Club* and the Gothic,” in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

point where they are rendered senseless by a capitalistic society. In this first chapter, I argue that Palahniuk tries to bridge the gap that is created by gender between individuals by mixing the binary categories of man and woman, masculinity and femininity, in order for his characters to work past them and find a new identity through deviance. I will discuss in what way Palahniuk presents masculinity and femininity in a post-modern American society, and draw inspiration from his use of Gothic elements to highlight his use of gender.

Palahniuk continued his critique of gender and gender roles through his following books. As far as common themes go, his first four books, including *Survivor*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Lullaby* and *Choke*, all have to do with individuals who have been outcast by society because of their deviant nature, and they all seek reconnection to the larger community because they realize that isolation will destroy them.<sup>35</sup> The characters challenge societal norms, reclaiming their individuality and thus their freedom. *Invisible Monsters*, however, is perhaps the novel where critique of gender becomes most apparent and shocking. The narrator, Shannon MacFarland, is tired of her meaningless job as a model working for big-time fashion designers. Addicted to her beauty, she becomes aware that she must quit her dependence on beauty in order to evolve spiritually and regain her individuality in a society infested by simulacra. In this novel, Palahniuk attacks the binary categories of sex and identity formation in a postmodern society by contorting the body, and going beyond its limitations, showing how identity and sex are based on the subject rather than societal rules. I will again argue that Palahniuk is trying to bridge the gap of gender differences that are separating individuals by stretching the boundaries of binary categories. In this novel, Palahniuk applies what I have labeled “going beyond the body,” meaning his characters stretch their sexual identity, gender and identity beyond the limitations of their bodies in order to free themselves from crippling societal norms. The body, then, plays a major part in Palahniuk’s character’s quest for freedom from social restraints and loneliness. By attacking traditional concepts of sexual identity, Palahniuk demonstrates the power that resides on the body, and that the battle of individuality lies here. In *Invisible Monsters*, Palahniuk presents ideas about gender that are similar to Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*; that we need to reflect on the gender categories and step outside of them, and consider who has the power to decide who shall be recognized as subjects. I will of course be using the ideas of Judith Butler regarding gender performance when discussing *Invisible Monsters*. For Palahniuk’s use of the

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<sup>35</sup> Kavanaugh, “Of Failed Romance, Writer’s Malpractice, And Prose for the Nose: A Conversation with Chuck Palahniuk,” 187.

body as a site of power, I will mainly be using two essays addressing the body and its function in *Invisible Monsters*; “Destruction and the Discourse of Deformity”<sup>36</sup> by Andrew Ng, and “On Mutilation; The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk’s Fiction”<sup>37</sup> by Andrew Slade. I will also be applying Andy Johnson’s ideas of body image and beauty in his article “Bullets and Blades: Narcissism and Violence in *Invisible Monsters*.”<sup>38</sup> To further argue the novel’s significance in terms of gender and social critique I will link the novel to the Gothic genre and its use of the sublime.

After *Choke* was published, Palahniuk changed his writing style and focused more on the horror genre than he had previously. Although there are Gothic elements in his first four books, something that will be addressed in both chapters one and two, they are not considered works of Horror. However, after *Choke*, Palahniuk wrote what would be his Horror trilogy, which includes *Lullaby*, *Diary* and *Haunted*. Although they are considered Horror novels, they still touch upon gender, identity and identity formation. I wanted to include some of his more recent work and a work from his horror collection, to show again how Palahniuk finds a way to critique aspects of gender in the most unusual ways, which is why I chose the final book *Diary* as it critiques other aspects of gender not addressed in the other two novels. As with the previous two novels, Misty Marie Kleinman is also spiritually and physically trapped by society’s gendered boundaries, however, she does not manage to escape through self-mutilation or pain, as the others do. Instead she finds herself in a life she has lived three times before, and in a society that upholds traditional gender roles in order for their society to survive, ultimately stunting evolution and individuality. My approach to the story is that it has a larger societal focus than the previous novels: the story depicts the societal situation for women, as it seems to align itself with the women’s suffrage movement in the nineteenth century, when women functioned as passive members of society rather than active participants and individuals. Palahniuk is again presenting a society where the power of gender lies with society and not with the individual, stunting individuality and creating gender categories that limit rather than connect individuals. While the previous novels, *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*, offer a means of escape for their characters to rejoin the community,

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Ng, “Destruction and the Discourse of Deformity: *Invisible Monsters* and the Ethics of Atrocity,” in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp.24-35.

<sup>37</sup> Slade, “On Mutilation; The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk’s Fiction,” pp. 62-72.

<sup>38</sup> Andy Johnson, “Bullets and Blades: Narcissism and Violence in *Invisible Monsters*,” in *Sacred & Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), pp. 61-72.

*Diary* offers no such thing but instead offers a warning: “a culture being unaware of the past will make the same mistakes, again and again, forever.”<sup>39</sup>

This gendered approach to *Diary* has not, to my knowledge, been done before, although other scholars, such as Heidi Ashbaugh and Christina Angel, have touched upon certain aspects regarding gender and *Diary*. Heidi Ashbaugh links *Diary* to the structures of Gothic and Horror genre in her article, while Christina Angel focus on morality and the body as it appears in many of Palahniuk’s novels, including *Diary*. To further highlight the importance of gender in *Diary*, I will explore the genres of the Gothic and Horror, using texts of Philip Brophy for Horror specifically, and Helene Meyer for the Gothic genre. To further argue Palahniuk’s attempts at challenging gender and his desire for social critique through literature, I will use Kathy Farquharson article that connects *Diary* with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The connection signifies a heavy layer of social critique as well as it displays Palahniuk’s “play” with gender because he is writing in a genre mostly dominated by women. The “play” with gender also becomes apparent through the use of form as the novel is written as a diary or a journal, a form used mostly by women as a means of self-expression when society left them no room for their voice. Not only does this connection to genre and form put Palahniuk alongside famous feminist literary writers, but also speaks heavily to his novels’ and literature’s ability to function as social critique.

The three novels I have chosen tie together the notion of connection between individuals through the shunning of gendered categories. By portraying characters trapped by society’s measures of success and happiness, and their quest for freeing themselves in order to gain authenticity, individuality and love, Palahniuk argues for a society devoid of socially constructed hurdles in order to restore a lost humanity. Within this argument, Palahniuk’s desire to pose social critique through literature also becomes apparent.

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<sup>39</sup> Kavanaugh, “Of Failed Romance, Writer’s Malpractice, And Prose for the Nose: A Conversation with Chuck Palahniuk,” 182.

## Chapter 1: Fight Club

Before there was the movie...  
Before young men started scarring kisses into their hands with lye and superglue...  
Before *The Weekly Standard* announced “The Crisis of Manliness” ...  
Before Susan Faludi’s book, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*...  
Before you could find graffiti in Los Angeles, spray painted tags that claim: “Tyler Durden Lives”...  
Before all that...there was just a short story.<sup>40</sup>

Before David Fincher’s adaption of the book *Fight Club* in 1999, the novel was mostly unknown to the American public when it was published in 1996. Having been published by W.W Norton for the mighty sum of six thousand dollars, merely “kiss off money” from the publishers, the book did not have immediate success, as Palahniuk tells that book sales “didn’t even cover what I drank out of the hotel mini bars” while on his three-city tour. The novel was given various reviews, ranging from claiming it was science fiction to the text being about “gay men watching one another fuck in public steam baths.”<sup>41</sup> Other critics called it “too dark,” “too violent” and “too strident and shrill and dogmatic.”<sup>42</sup> Everyone centered on the violence between men and the demonic attitude of the protagonist/antagonist Tyler Durden, forgetting that it was written in the spirit of *The Great Gatsby*, as an American romance, just “updated a little.”<sup>43</sup> Reviewers forgot it was written with the intention to give men “a new social model...to share their lives,” to “give men the structure and roles and rules of a game,” but most importantly the intention was to give a model of a new way to “gather and be together.”<sup>44</sup> Thus emerged *Fight Club*, which was just a story before everything else, but it was a story about re-connecting to one another, as Palahniuk tells is the essence of all his stories: “...all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people,”<sup>45</sup> they are about “reconnecting with community...” and “attempts to discard the distractions that separate people from others and from themselves.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, afterword in *Fight Club* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1996), 210-213.

<sup>41</sup> Palahniuk, Afterword, 216.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 215-216.

<sup>44</sup> Palahniuk, Afterword, 215.

<sup>45</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, “Fact and Fiction: An Introduction,” *Stranger than Fiction* (New York: Random House Inc., 2004), xv.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades: Narcissism and Violence in *Invisible Monsters*,” 71.

One of these “distractions” that have separated rather than connected humans is the field of gender. Gender has become a complicated issue in the 21st century, having been challenged by the feminist movement in the 60s, and also the gay and lesbian liberation movements that followed. The movements complicated the issue because it was no longer black and white, the lines between man and woman, gay and straight, were becoming blurred as the separated sexed spheres of society slowly were erased and as people who were outside of these limited definitions emerged. “Deviants” from these dichotomous categories of sex and sexual preference, such as bisexuals and transgender people, have emerged and shown the previous binary categories to be too limited, too excluding for the majority of the world. The binary categories of gender have become almost pointless, as there are more exceptions to the rules than there are rules, and it has come to the point where the categories are almost nihilistic. The binary gender categories are alive in order to maintain the structure of society, to figure out what function one another has; in essence to square off, fence or separate people. But what happens when the fences are blurred, switched or completely gone? In this chapter I will argue that through his writing, Palahniuk is trying to bridge the gap of differences that gender offers society by mixing the binary categories of man and woman, masculinity and femininity, eradicating them, enlarging them and caricaturing them in order for his characters to work past them and find their identity through, and despite of, their disbandment of such terms. In his depiction of plot and characters in *Fight Club*, Palahniuk paints a different picture of contemporary American culture: a society where the categories of man and woman have been switched and distorted to the point where they no longer serve any function. Studying *Fight Club* in such a gendered perspective, I will be looking at how Palahniuk depicts what has become of femininity and masculinity in a post-modern world and what the outcome of this may be. I will also argue that Palahniuk depicts the man in “crisis” and that the book does not represent misogynistic thoughts, as has been claimed before, but rather it paints a picture of the woman as *femme fatale* and ultimately man’s savior.

## **I am Joe Schmoe:**

### **Faludi, Kimmel and the “Crisis in Masculinity”**

It is this “crisis in masculinity” and the growing emphasis on gender relations and the masculine identity amongst middle-class white men in the United States at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that seems to be the locus of this novel. The narrator describes the situation as a



“generation of men raised by women,”<sup>47</sup> creating a picture of what the aftermath of women’s liberation, the feminist values that followed and the introduction of the “soft man” in the sixties and seventies meant to young, white men growing up in the nineties. Susan Faludi describes the preamble to this “crisis of masculinity” in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* as a nation where “fathers had made their sons masters of the universe,”<sup>48</sup> and the time of “manhood after victory” was marked by pilgrimage and pioneering. However, the men arising from the post-Watergate era were not the “masters of the universe,” but unhappy young men,<sup>49</sup> far from the ideals of the Marlboro Man and G.I Joe their fathers had been and learned to idolize. As a result, the young men of the nineties we meet in this novel, were met with a world their fathers had yet to prepare them for: a society saturated by consumerism, industrialization and the mass media, a society that had revised the traditional ideals of masculinity.

Faludi argues that the locus of the identity crisis for men lay in the feeling of “lack of control:” “The man controlling his environment is today the prevailing American image of masculinity.”<sup>50</sup> As masculinity in itself is defined from a cultural standpoint, American men have had a very dominant position in society, from the independent Self-Made Man of Thoreau to the brigade-leading general of General Patton to Neil Armstrong conquering the moon. However, as the 20th century post-war American society was developing, so was the image of what a man was or should be. The masculine ideal of the “warrior hero” was shifting: “The frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection – all the elements of the old formula for attaining manhood had vanished.”<sup>51</sup> This, Susan Faludi argues, resulted in “a hunt for a shape-shifting enemy who could take the form of women...or gays...or black men in the military,”<sup>52</sup> however, in *Fight Club*, the enemy reveals itself to be men themselves. Michael Kimmel argues that as females and minorities have entered all-male arenas, the sense of “something lost” arose: “If ‘they’ gain, ‘we’ lose.”<sup>53</sup> However childish this may seem, Kimmel argues that men *have* lost something along the way, which is the image of the Self-Made Man, much thanks to capitalism and the

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<sup>47</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50.

<sup>48</sup> Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Robert Bly, *Iron John* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1991), 3.

<sup>50</sup> Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>53</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 218.

dominance of big corporations opposed to the small, independent businesses of farmers and skilled workers.<sup>54</sup>

These thoughts resonates in *Fight Club*, where the narrator seems to resemble the troubled young men in Faludi's domestic-violence groups, but it is also in relation to the young "feminized" men of Robert Bly as he describes in *Iron John*. Here Bly addresses the "remoteness" of the father figure, which stands as the catalyst for the book's generation of confused and bewildered men.<sup>55</sup> Faludi and Kimmel also bring up the image of the absent father, who promised their sons they could "take their places among the nation's elite simply by working hard and applying themselves."<sup>56</sup> However, this did not happen in the nineties as the young men realize the world of their fathers was "hollow, meaningless and inauthentic."<sup>57</sup> This reflects in the conversation the narrator has about his father: "Me, I knew my dad for six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years... When I got a job and turned twenty-five... I said, now what? My dad didn't know..."<sup>58</sup> The narrator also shares that "Tyler never knew his father," either, which it seems sparked his initial idea for fight club, seeking "payback,"<sup>59</sup> as the narrator mentions on page 53: "...I asked Tyler what he'd been fighting. Tyler said, his father."

In addition to the absent father, Faludi offers a different enemy to the nineties men: postmodern consumer society. In a rapid-changing world, the masculine ideal has yet to keep up as society has sped along, gendering the social order along the way. Faludi presents the image of the "ornamental" society where men actually are on display as objects, rather like women have been in previous decades.<sup>60</sup> The narrator the reader encounters in *Fight Club* is at the heart of this modern "ornamental" society; a young white-collar worker, living in a condo on the fifteenth floor, surrounded by his endless consumerist habit of nesting among clever interior items from IKEA. At the same time he is also battling insomnia for reasons unbeknownst to the reader at first. The insomnia becomes the symbol for the monotonous existence the narrator experiences; the repetitiveness and mechanical behavior of inauthenticity and the focus modern society has on the "ornamental," the "outer": "Everything

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<sup>54</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 218 & 228.

<sup>55</sup> Bly, *Iron John*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 221.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>58</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50-51.

<sup>59</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 221.

<sup>60</sup> Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*, 452 & 506.

is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything...”<sup>61</sup> This also resonates in the job he has as a recall campaign coordinator, in which he gets sent around the country with his mathematical formula, deciding whether or not to it is profitable to call back cars with lethal faults. As the narrators says: “It’s simple arithmetic.”<sup>62</sup> This depicts the anaesthetized existence men were living in at the time, removed from life: “...you can’t touch anything, and nothing can touch you,”<sup>63</sup> and also describes the amoral world of contemporary capitalism. Judging from the descriptions in the book, however, the men do not seem to be “ornamental,” meaning they are not used for consumer marketing schemes to sell Calvin Klein underwear, but rather as machines judged by their ability to produce something or to fill a mechanical function in order for society to continue.

Kimmel’s arguments are also a critique of the post-modern society represented in the novel; that which modern men are battling, or feel threatened by, are “industrialization and deindustrialization, immigration and perceived invasion.”<sup>64</sup> As with Faludi, Kimmel also argues for the man’s “loss of control” as the locus for the “crisis” in masculinity, but it is more as the result of the loss of the “Self-Made Man.” “...there are fewer and fewer self-made successes and far more self-blaming failures...”<sup>65</sup> One could see the crisis as the American Dream gone rotten or turned in on itself, as working hard and being rich is portrayed by Palahniuk as something devoid of any meaning, as he comments on the dream of success: “...the dream is a big house, off alone somewhere...Some lovely isolated nest where you can invite only the rabble you like. An environment you can control, free from conflict and pain. Where you can rule.”<sup>66</sup> But is this really what we want? Does this dream job with the fat paycheck lead to freedom and happiness? He continues: “We get there, and we’re alone. We’re lonely.”<sup>67</sup> Ultimately his characters achieve this success, but come to the realization that it is meaningless and their existence is useless. This uselessness in capitalistic contemporary society has resulted, as we see in *Fight Club*, in boredom. Without male ideals and only the sense of “lost self” remaining, the narrator seeks identification in the things he owns: “That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The

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<sup>61</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 216.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>66</sup> Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*, xv.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

dishes in the cabinet was me. The plants were me.”<sup>68</sup> There has been a shift from human contact to material contact, and it has come to the point where “...the things you used to own, now they own you.”<sup>69</sup> Even sexual desire has been replaced by an IKEA catalogue!<sup>70</sup> The modern man is not a man anymore, not even a person; he is his job, he is his IKEA furniture, meaning that in modern contemporary America he is an object, a person devoid of authenticity. And on top of all this, women have “invaded” the last “all-male bastions” like sports and the military, removing all sense of masculine domains. However wrongfully or rightfully one might look upon men laying all their manhood in all-male dominion in certain spheres in society, the presence of these “invasions” has made it harder for men to “prove their manhood,”<sup>71</sup> thus sparking aggression: “...American men’s anxieties about demonstrating and proving masculinity remain unabated. But American men are also angry,”<sup>72</sup> which clearly resonates in the violence of the fight clubs and Tyler Durden’s philosophy of destruction. The solution, then, to the “over-feminization” of men was “more masculinity,” as Kimmel argues “...if they can’t be Number One, they’ve decided to be Number Two – with a bullet.”<sup>73</sup>

This is what Palahniuk is depicting with his characters in *Fight Club*; he is depicting the gap that is separating people from connecting to one another by exaggerating forms of femininity and masculinity. The connections under scrutiny are male/female connections but also connections between men and their connection with their inner “Hairy Man,”<sup>74</sup> and also their connection to their feminine side. It is interesting to note how feminized the men are presented at the beginning of the novel. As a result of the women’s liberation movements, women started to find their place in previously “all-male” spheres of society. Palahniuk seems to have reversed this in *Fight Club* by portraying men walking into “all-female” spheres, or quarters that were largely seen as belonging to the feminine side of society. One example of this is the narrator’s obsession with interior design, furnishing his apartment with “clever Njurunda coffee tables... [a] Haparanda sofa group... The Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and friendly unbleached paper.”<sup>75</sup> Although this is perhaps more a critique of

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<sup>68</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 111.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>71</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 216.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>74</sup> Bly, *Iron John*, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 43.

consumerism, the attending of group therapy sessions is not. The narrator attends group therapy sessions such as blood parasites, colon cancer and testicular cancer in order for him to cure his insomnia because it provides an arena for an authentic release of emotional pressure. The group sessions, then, act as a realm of freedom of emotion, catharsis and cleansing: “This is the only place I ever really relax and give up. This is my vacation.”<sup>76</sup> This is where the former ideals of the stoic soldier disappears and are replaced by the emasculated white-collar worker sobbing, where shoulders “inhale themselves up in a long draw, then drop, drop, drop in jerking sobs.”<sup>77</sup> However, the group sessions do not become an adequate “escape” for the narrator, but rather it enhances the ongoing feminization of the white middle-class men portrayed by Palahniuk.

The clearest example of the “feminized” man is the testicular cancer group “Remaining Men Together.” The members in the group are men who have lost their testicles to cancer, meaning their “manhood” is completely cut off, so to speak. Physically, their locus of manhood is gone, meaning the gap between man and woman has been closed, biologically speaking. However, Palahniuk did not stop at the physical appearance; the men are not quietly sitting and conversing about cars and beer but talking about their feelings during “hug time.”<sup>78</sup> The collapse of man and woman into one is also symbolized in the figure of Bob: “...The big moosie tread right across the room when it was hug time...his eyes already shrink-wrapped in tears...”<sup>79</sup> Bob is an ex-bodybuilder who shot up too much testosterone in his body in order for him to get bigger muscles, i.e. become more “masculine,” conforming to the more contemporary image of the “sculpted man.” What the body then would do, says the narrator, is up the estrogen to balance the body out, thus making Bob’s body develop a more feminized body.<sup>80</sup> Kimmel says that “men’s bodies have long been symbols of masculinity in America,” and that the body reveals “manhood’s power, strength, and self-control.”<sup>81</sup> This makes Bob interesting as he reveals a total gender-confusion, or more a gender-collapse amongst white males in post-modern America. He is neither a “full man” in a traditional sense, yet neither a woman, although one could argue that he has been “overly-feminized” to the point resembling more the “soft man” (in this case, “ultra-soft man”) of the sixties and

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<sup>76</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>81</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 224.

seventies. However, being neither/or has no positive effect, neither Bob or the narrator are presented as happy characters content with their lifestyle and their “overly-feminized” bodies and minds. The “crisis of masculinity in contemporary America,” as Krister Friday argues, was indeed a fact, which required “conspicuous remedies.”<sup>82</sup> Even the narrator says towards the end of the book: “I hated my life...I felt trapped. I was too complete. I was too perfect. I needed a way out of my tiny life.”<sup>83</sup> The narrator is in a state of “male malaise” as Kimmel argues, which “expresses...a yearning for a deeper, more authentic version of masculinity than the one on offer from the consumer economy.”<sup>84</sup> The mechanic, resembling Tyler Durden in speech, describes it best towards the end of the book: “We don’t have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against society. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression.”<sup>85</sup> What could the solution to this be?

## **I am Joe’s Boiling Rage of Failed Expectations:**

### **Tyler Durden, Fight Clubs and the Self-Made Man**

Enter Tyler Durden. Durden (conspicuously rhyming with “Burden,” as Cynthia Kuhn points out)<sup>86</sup> enters the story naked, carrying lumber logs onto a beach to create the “hand of perfection” in which he sits in the middle, and as the narrator observes: “for one perfect minute Tyler sat in the palm of a perfection he’d created himself.”<sup>87</sup> Just by this entrance, one can tell that Tyler represents a different kind of man than the narrator and his comatose buddies; the kind of Self-Made Man who rests on traditional notions of manhood such as physical strength, self-control and power which “defined their fathers’ and their grandfathers’ eras...”<sup>88</sup> Instead of searching for a “new” masculine identity, Tyler regresses back to old ideals, centering on features such as physical strength, violence and action rather than words.<sup>89</sup> Tyler was also created on the background of the disappointment and the rage that followed the young boys grew up without ideals or father figures to look up to, hence the

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<sup>82</sup> Krister Friday, ”’A generation of Men Without History’: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom,” *Postmodern Culture* 13 (May 2003), 40.

<sup>83</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 172-173.

<sup>84</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 220.

<sup>85</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 149.

<sup>86</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound: *Fight Club* and the Gothic,” 37.

<sup>87</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 33.

<sup>88</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 218.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

American Dream had been stolen from them: “We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we’ll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won’t. And we’re just learning this fact,” Tyler said. “So don’t fuck with us.”<sup>90</sup> Tyler converts the rage left by empty dreams into restoring a traditional male identity.

Durden comes into the story as a messiah, the great savior for a “generation of men raised by women,” to remind the men of “what kind of power they still have” and to “teach each man in the project [Mayhem] that he had the power to control history.”<sup>91</sup> His philosophy of destruction centers around destroying everything in order to build it up again in one’s own way. Tyler’s mission of building a new identity for young men was to destroy what they previously recognized as their identity, thus resulting in blowing up the narrator’s apartment (“The dishes were me.”). Tyler’s philosophy of “self-destruction” in order to take control is tied with Judith Butler’s theory of recognition: “...that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings...[and] The terms in which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable.”<sup>92</sup> In post-modern society, men are no longer recognized by society as “men,” seeing as the spheres of dominance in which the male identity was stored has been eroded. To Palahniuk’s representation of modern society, man is equal to woman and vice versa, thus making men “unrecognizable” and as a result they fail to become “socially viable beings.” Tyler realizes that the power of recognition lies in a society, as Butler argues “...if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that ‘undo’ the person by conferring recognition, or ‘undo’ the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced.”<sup>93</sup> In *Fight Club*, men are not in power of recognition, thus they end up not being recognized by society as men, which renders them impassive, and without identity. This ties to what Faludi argues: that as the “ornamental” culture and the entertainment culture took over, the fathers became less prevalent as technology took over with their gizmos and gadgets and “youth was given an edge over age”: “what was needed was the ability to buy, not produce.”<sup>94</sup> The responsibility of regaining manhood laid with the young men, not their fathers, which resulted in a hunt for “self-

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<sup>90</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 166.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 120-122.

<sup>92</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Faludi, *Stiffed*, 531.

presentation,”<sup>95</sup> through the mighty jungle of the entertainment world. Faludi continues by stating that men’s image of masculinity had become objectified through the “ornamental” society’s focus on displaying the man through media’s masses. The male body had developed into something to be “ogled” on the same level as women had been ogled for decades – the man was recognized for his body more than anything else. However, with Tyler Durden, “manliness” takes a new form, or rather regains its old form of subjectivity, where “atavistic notion of masculinity” has been resurrected and “offered the chance to regain its efficacy” again.<sup>96</sup> Although this masculinity also centers on the body, inflicting pain and self-destruction, the point is not to look sculpted, as Jesse Kavaldo notes, the exercise “exists not for vanity, which would be coded feminine, but utility, which is coded masculine.”<sup>97</sup>

As mentioned before, Tyler gives the men of Generation X an identity, which is the identity of the brute: the Self-Made Man gone primal. This is where the fight clubs enter into the story. Initially the first fight club was based on the curiosities of two drunk, young men: “If you’ve never been in a fight, you wonder. About getting hurt, about what you are capable of doing against another man.”<sup>98</sup> Tyler introduces the raw physical power of men in order for them to feel community and belonging, as the narrator tells: “You aren’t alive like you’re alive at fight club. When it’s you and one other guy under that one light in the middle of all those watching.”<sup>99</sup> Talking, crying and “hug time” have been replaced by wordless “grunting and noise” and “hysterical shouting,”<sup>100</sup> drawing a clear contrast to the effeminate group therapy sessions. Even the male body image has changed: “The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says...After a month he is carved out of wood.”<sup>101</sup> The fight club offers the men in this Generation X a remedy for the repetitiveness, meaningless, painless existence and to find camaraderie in wanting to “explore the limits of your own endurance.”<sup>102</sup> It resembles

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<sup>95</sup> Faludi, *Stiffed*, 531.

<sup>96</sup> Friday, “A generation of Men Without History,” 7.

<sup>97</sup> Jesse Kavaldo, “With Us or Against Us: Chuck Palahniuk’s 9/11,” *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, ed. Kuhn and Rubin (New York: Routledge, 2012), 110.

<sup>98</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 52.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50-51.

<sup>102</sup> Erik Kielland-Lund, “Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*: Ritualized Violence as Identity Formation,” *Feeling in Others: Essays on Empathy and Suffering in Modern American Culture* (Print out, 2008), 122.



one of the stories of “connection” which Palahniuk describes in his non-fiction book *Stranger than Fiction*: the wrestlers. As with these all-male wrestling teams, the fight clubs portrayed in *Fight Club* seem to emulate the wrestling teams and their sense of belonging and connection in spite of the ferocious violence:

When we’re on the mat, we want to just beat the piss out of each other, but when we’re off the mat we know what each other’s going through because we’ve been there...As much as you’re enemies on the mat, as hard as you’re going to hit him, once you’re off the mat we’re not violent people... You’re brothers.<sup>103</sup>

The point of fight club and the violence is to build community, to build connection and tear down barriers that separate people as Palahniuk mentions is one of the characteristics of his stories.<sup>104</sup> They are all bound together in brotherhood, like the all-male gentleman’s clubs supporting their matching emblems, whether that is a cauliflower ear or a kissing mark from lye burned into your skin. It is all about connection, and being men together. As Kuhn notes, “it is clear that we are supposed to read the ‘feminized’ therapy against the ‘masculinized’ fight clubs,” i.e. the stain of tears on the narrator’s shirt versus his bloodied face print on the floor after a fight;<sup>105</sup> seeing the fight clubs as more of the “right” bonding method for males. This brotherhood of lost boys has given their life a new meaning: “After you’ve been to fight club, watching football on television is like watching pornography when you could be having great sex.”<sup>106</sup> This is an interesting observation by the narrator because it draws in two major notions dealing with gender: that the “traditional” male interest in viewing sports almost equals the satisfaction of pornography, and that the “having great sex” alludes not to the actual act but to the male-on-male fighting in fight club. Following this, the narrator contemplates whether or not “another woman is really the answer I need.”<sup>107</sup> One interpretation of this could be misogynistic, or homosexual, but it can also be interpreted as the narrator’s ultimate embracing of the all-masculine identity and the shunning of the feminization of men that has previously been prevalent. Because of the previous “over-feminization” and the gender-confusion, the gender-aspect has done a complete turnover to the opposite spectrum of “over-masculinization,” where only men are needed. This also

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<sup>103</sup> Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*, 18-19.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>105</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound,” 37.

<sup>106</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 50.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 51.

comes forth in Tyler's behavior towards Marla: "Except for their humping, Marla and Tyler are never in the same room."<sup>108</sup> Tyler is maintaining the "separate spheres" that were very prevalent in society up to the women's liberation movement during the sixties and seventies. I will be returning to women's roles in this novel later in the chapter. While at the start of the novel, Palahniuk was caricaturing a society of "men as women," he is now depicting the complete opposite as to present a potential solution to the barriers of our binary gender categories which separates human beings. Whether or not this solution is meant as a parody or an actual perception of reality, the "play" with gender speaks against the dichotomy of the sexes and caricatures them to the point of ridiculousness.

Although men are now men, and as fight clubs spread like wildfire across the United States, it is clear that the "masculine" revolution is anything but positive. Driven by a bored anarchist soap-maker out to destroy the corporate world in order to restore this post-modernistic Thoreauian, utopian nature of "hunting elk in the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center,"<sup>109</sup> the young men are driven into a state of absolute anonymity as they lose their name and identity by, for example, wearing the same clothes: "Two black shirts. Two black pairs of trousers. One pair of heavy black shoes. Two pair of black socks and two pair of plain underwear."<sup>110</sup> The young men's identities become that of the space monkeys who get shot up to space in order to "push a lever, push a button," meaning they do simple tasks while being oblivious to the actual big effect. Kielland-Lund observes that the experience of fight club may be seen as "only temporary and ultimately unfulfilling"<sup>111</sup> since the men are not recognized as heroes but are anonymous ("you are not your name")<sup>112</sup>, and full manhood, it seems, is not attained until death. Only when you die can you become an identity, as with Robert Paulsen who gets his name chanted by the entire group when he gets killed on a mission.<sup>113</sup> It is also interesting to note here that the storyline is circling back to the narrator's previous life of anonymity and "living in a suitcase" which contained "two black trousers. The bare minimum you need to survive."<sup>114</sup> As a result of this return to anonymity, the "new man" has not gained a new identity - the muscular, trimmed

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<sup>108</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 65.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>111</sup> Kielland-Lund, "Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*: Ritualized Violence as Identity Formation," 125.

<sup>112</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 143.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

nailed, demi-god of Tyler Durden has bit himself in the ass, or rather experience his “one minute of perfection” by taking the fight club and the male identity too far. This comes to symbolize the short-lived masculine “manly-man.” The narrator contemplates towards the end of the novel that “Tyler is free. And I am not.”<sup>115</sup> This is true, seeing as Tyler has had the courage to break somewhat free of the constrained and tedious life of the effeminate “consumer-man,” and removed himself from the fear of pain and mortality. However, he is stuck in his freedom, which can only take him to “a desired nadir of pain and humiliation.”<sup>116</sup> Tyler has freedom without really being free from the destruction and devastation his gender dictates for him; yes, he can blow up buildings and burn holes through people’s skin in order for them to hit “rock bottom” and to experience pain, but that is all he can ever do. Tyler Durden has raised the all-dominating male-warrior back from the dead rather than created “sustaining alternatives to take us into the future,”<sup>117</sup> making it clear that regressing back to old masculine ideals of dominance is clearly not the way to go in relation to gender.

The concept of gender is further complicated towards the end of the novel. As the story draws to a close, the reader experiences a moment of clarity and surprise as the realization of who Tyler really is becomes clear: “We’re not two separate men... We use the same body but at different times... Tyler Durden is my hallucination.”<sup>118</sup>

## **I am Joe’s Imaginary Friend:**

### **The Id, Ego and the Androgynous Brain**

The revelation of the narrator’s double persona comes as a complete surprise for the reader and gives a new perspective to the book. Why did the narrator develop a second personality? What does it mean that the narrator felt the need to create him? And what does it mean that the effeminate narrator and the masculine Tyler Durden share the same body? Can one man be two people at the same time? What does it mean to the perception of gender that the main character is split into two? And which side comes out as “the winner” at the end of all this?

As a means to counteract the boredom and find a solution to obtaining and regaining a masculine identity, the narrator created Tyler Durden: “I hated my life. I was tired and bored

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>116</sup> Kielland-Lund, “Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*: Ritualized Violence as Identity Formation,” 124.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 164-168.

with my job and my furniture, and I couldn't see any way to change things.”<sup>119</sup> Keeping with the gendered perspective, the role in which men have filled in society has been unfulfilling, and so much so that the narrator has felt the need to create an independent personality in order to escape his confinements. Tyler Durden acts according to his urges, desires and needs lacking the restraint and civil-obedience to his other personality, which is the narrator. The interaction and dynamic relationship between the two parts can be explained through psychoanalytical theory. Freud operated with three separate consciousnesses: the id, the ego and the super-ego. The ego is the civilized part of consciousness, which acts according to socially accepted rules in order to be accepted into civil life. He further explains the ego/id relationship by explaining that “...like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse; with this difference, that the rider tries to do so with his own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces.”<sup>120</sup> The ego is then the one in full control of the situation, which is reflected in the narrator: “My life was too perfect.” The narrator is trying to keep in check his “natural” urges of masculinity, which have been suppressed as “feminized” consumer society has changed his ideals and suppressed his role as a man.

The restraint then has become too much to bear, thus unleashing the id. The id comes in the form of Tyler Durden, who embodies everything that the narrator desires to be: “I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world.”<sup>121</sup> Tyler is “allowed” to do anything he likes with free reign, in contrast to the ego, which is constrained and bound by the rules dictated by society.

As a representative for the modern man, the narrator is an interesting subject to observe seeing as his “ideal” man is nothing but a dream. Tyler is only “alive” or active in the hours where the narrator is sleeping, making his existence extremely liminal. In Freudian terms, dreams are where the unconscious and repressed desire is let loose, and where society's restrictions no longer apply, thus making one free to do whatever one wants. Also in Jungian terms do dreams have important symbolic value. The position of the emasculated post-modernistic man is not a desirable one, thus the development of the ideal man takes place. In

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<sup>119</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 172.

<sup>120</sup> Marc A. Price, “THE FIGHT FOR SELF: The Language of the Unconscious in *Fight Club*,” 2002, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/files/papers/fight-for-self-marc-price.pdf>.

<sup>121</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 174.

Palahniuk's vision, this "ideal" man is nothing but a dream, and a psychological disease to boot, signaling a strong urgency in revising the male ideal.

The dynamic relationship between the narrator and Tyler Durden is purely mental, as they both use the same body but at different times. It is then interesting to look at this seemingly dichotomous mental relationship in light of Virginia Woolf's views on the "androgynous mind." Woolf argues that the mind, as with the body, must have two sexes, and that they must cooperate in order to create harmony: "It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized."<sup>122</sup> The desire for equal parts man and woman is what is needed, according to Woolf, to create great art. In *Fight Club*, the balance between the 'female' (narrator) and 'male' (Durden) has been distorted. Not only does this dichotomous body function as a micro-cosmos of society as a whole, but it also speaks directly to the man, that without this harmony of both feminine and masculine, without either one being overly dominant the mind cannot be "resonant and porous...transmit emotion without impediment" or be "naturally creative" and "incandescent."<sup>123</sup> Through the narrator, Palahniuk is depicting the failed assumptions of man being only masculine, that it is a failed dream, and even stretches it as far as calling it a diseased and destructive form of man. Jesse Kavaldo also adds that the split personality reflects a cultured society where men "must conform to a rigid code of a masculine self-sufficiency," while at the same time to allow for "crying and buying, grooming and consuming,"<sup>124</sup> meaning that the modern man ultimately must embody both male and female traits, making the man much more complex than the "traditional" man. One might also interpret the text in the way that Palahniuk is criticizing the "overly-feminine" man; however, I do not believe he is, although he certainly conveys that man is not happy in that particular position. What seems to predominate as the essential question of the text is: What should men do? Where is the image of the man going? Is he choosing to fight or flight? In this case, he has chosen to fight (literally) in order for man's survival. It is all about preservation of the lost ideals, which ultimately fails in its own destruction. Although the crisis of male identity seems like something that can be overcome and redeemed through a "recovery of male prowess," the "'present' condition...of continued helplessness and the

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<sup>122</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (New York: Oxford Press, 2008), 127-128.

<sup>123</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, 128.

<sup>124</sup> Kavaldo, "With Us or Without Us," 109.

related sense that any male identity that exists” seems to be on the brink of extinction, rather than emergence.<sup>125</sup>

The ‘brute’ comes up short in the end, which becomes prevalent during the book’s first and final scenes. The book opens, narratively speaking, in medias res present time, with Tyler Durden aiming a gun in the mouth of the narrator. The storyline then jumps back in time in order to describe the events that led up to this crucial moment. Knowing what Durden represents, the symbol of the scene becomes evident: the restored ‘male-ideal’ is literally trying to kill off the ‘feminized’ modern-man. The battle of the sexes is clear as the narrator contemplates, “Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me. I don’t want Marla, and Tyler doesn’t want me around, not anymore.” Tyler is trying to restore the original status of the two genders, as Sally Robinson argues, “...the very act of protesting against feminization becomes the guarantee of remasculinization,” thus leading to the “resuscitation of a stable gender order.”<sup>126</sup> The stable gender order here is a paradigm in which the man is the dominant force in society, as the narrator explains further down on the page: “This isn’t about *love* as in *caring*. This is about *property* as in *ownership*.”<sup>127</sup> Although Tyler wants Marla, it is not for the reason of love – it is for possession, a reclaiming of what was once “rightfully his.” Using Tyler as a symbol for a “lost-and-not-to-be-regained-again” world, Palahniuk is depicting a world without love and connection, a world where more barriers separate than unite. The threat of this world is imminent as we are reunited with the scene during the book’s final chapters: “To God, this looks like one man alone, holding a gun in his own mouth, but it’s Tyler holding the gun, and it’s my life.”<sup>128</sup> Palahniuk throws his own spin on Freudian sublimation, as it is realized that the narrator has been fighting himself and the strong ideals he has been carrying with him all along like a disease. The enemy is not external, it is internal, and now the destructive powers of those old ideals are about to take over. Or are they?

In this crucial scene between which identity lives on and which dies, Marla Singer interrupts the action. Up until this point, neither the narrator nor Marla has been able to separate Tyler from the narrator – they have been one person. However, as Marla enters with

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<sup>125</sup> Friday, “A generation of Men Without History,” 12.

<sup>126</sup> Sally Robinson, “Feminized Men and Inauthentic Women: *Fight Club* and the Limits of Anti-Consumerist Critique,” *Genders: Presenting Innovative Work. In the Arts, Humanities and Social Theories*, Issue 53, Spring 2011, [http://www.genders.org/g53/g53\\_robinson.html](http://www.genders.org/g53/g53_robinson.html).

<sup>127</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 14.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

her “gang of light” who are, ironically enough, actually people dying of bowel cancer, melanoma etc., the narrator has a sense of clarity: “This is like a total epiphany moment for me. I’m not killing myself, I yell. I’m killing Tyler.”<sup>129</sup> For the time being, Tyler is now dead, but as I will show later in this essay, his thoughts of “eternal life” may still be alive and amongst society. The significant feat in this scene is that the epiphany is sparked by the entrance of a woman, that of Marla Singer. This action further stirs the gender-pot Palahniuk is stirring, as the savior of the ‘modern man’ is none other than a woman, because, after all, it was all about Marla.

## **I am Joe’s Beating Heart:**

### **Marla, Femininity and Love**

It might not be surprising, judging from Tyler Durden’s worldview, that some critics have described *Fight Club* a misogynistic book. Presenting a world (almost) devoid of women and where men have filled their roles, like stepping into the Twilight Zone, femininity and women are given a limited amount of space in this novel, signaling that this post-modern world is perhaps not a place for women at all. Is Palahniuk saying that women are not needed? I believe he is saying the contrary, as the only reason for the narrator’s survival boils down (no pun intended) to that of Marla Singer. I also believe he is continuing his exaggeration of gender roles through his female characters as well as male, in order to further illustrate his point of society’s useless employment of gender dichotomy.

As Marla is a representative for women in a post-modern society, it is interesting to look at how she is described and how she functions in relation to both the narrator and Tyler. However, it might make her role more significant if one looks at the few female characters represented in the novel.

Femininity is represented in many ways in this story; as consumerism, lack of authenticity, dependency, emotion and lack of will to stand against mass psychology. These forces, Robinson argues, are marked as “feminizing” codes because they stand against man as the individual, self-determining and autonomous agent who “battles against ‘society’ or vaguely drawn array of social forces that always aims to curtail his autonomy and agency.”<sup>130</sup> It is not because women are necessarily “phony, self-indulgent, dependent or will-less,” but

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<sup>129</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 204-205.

<sup>130</sup> Robinson, “Feminized Men and Inauthentic Women: *Fight Club* and the Limits of Anti-Consumerist Critique,” 2.

because the individual (man) can only claim his individuality in a society that is “radically at odds with his needs.”<sup>131</sup> As genders are defined by negated definitions – a man is a man when he does not inhabit womanly features, and vice versa – the logic of this narrative dictates that authenticity is a purely masculine state. Seeing consumerism as “feminization” of society, and that feminization leads to a state of artificiality, femininity then becomes the destructive force, which is threatening man’s position in society. This becomes clear in the actions of Tyler Durden, endeavoring for a paradigm that “feeds into a fantasy of constructing a world without women, a world where the feminine disappears.”<sup>132</sup> In this case, the argument for a misogynistic view is prevalent, and it attains a better stronghold when one looks upon the other female characters in the novel.

Firstly, the women we are met with occur in the narrator’s meetings with support groups for terminally ill people. Just this can be interpreted as femininity on the “verge of death;” with women only embodying characters that are going towards extinction. The reader is introduced to Chloe, a member of the group for brain parasites: “The little skeleton of a woman named Chloe with the seat of her pants hanging down.”<sup>133</sup> She has been given no feminine attributes, only descriptions of a person devoid of life and color; an inanimate thing like a skeleton “dipped in wax.”<sup>134</sup> Her physical body has been stripped of everything resembling femininity, making her a most depressing representation for women in post-modern America. Palahniuk is yet again erasing the lines between genders, describing a society where the binary gender categories have been distorted, both physically and psychologically, which is reflected in her last wish: “...all Chloe wanted was to get laid for the last time.”<sup>135</sup> Chloe’s last death wish was not to find love or be with her family, because the emotion ‘love’, or ‘true love’, does not exist, thus leaving only the act of fornication. This could be interpreted on several levels: as a result of shallow consumerism, a critique of the void of emotion in capitalistic consumer society or the reversal of gender roles, namely the “masculinization” of women. Sexual prowess and desire were traditionally traits assigned to the man, as I have mentioned previously, thus giving Chloe, in this case, manly traits. The narrator contemplates this “gender-switch” as he reacts with disgust, or worse, with total lack

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<sup>131</sup> Robinson, “Feminized Men and Inauthentic Women: *Fight Club* and the Limits of Anti-Consumerist Critique,” 2.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>133</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 19.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>135</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 19.



of excitement as Chloe mentions her home selection of pornographic material: “Normal times, I’d be sporting an erection.”<sup>136</sup> However, these are not normal times, and the chemistry between the two genders is completely emptied of emotion and desire. The genders do not serve a purpose anymore as both men and women have embodied the opposite gender’s traits. It might seem as if Palahniuk is criticizing Virginia Woolf’s romanticized view on the two-sexed brain in *A Room of One’s Own*, however, he is merely stretching the terms, making the observation of the imbalance that resides in both men and women but in a reversed fashion. The harmony is harmonizing so well that the man has “become” a woman, and the woman has “become” the man, consequently rendering the genders completely meaningless and unable to survive, thus the dying image of Chloe.

It seems that in an inauthentic world, gender does not seem to matter. If the dichotomy of gender were based on biological factors, the gender roles would be maintained no matter which way society leaned or bended. However, this novel is a good example of gender being bound by social law, meaning it is something created in order to build and maintain structure in society, as Simone de Beauvoir claims in *The Second Sex*: “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.”<sup>137</sup> Because simulacra (“a copy of a copy of a copy”) have taken over for authentic human bonding, the genders have distanced themselves from their “intended meaning,” leaving them in a state of uselessness and redundancy.

A further sign that gender has lost its authenticity is Marla Singer’s invasion of the testicular cancer group. In a room with “twenty men and only one woman,”<sup>138</sup> Marla blends in as “one of the guys,” and is in fact more like the “real” members of the group, seeing as Marla does not have testicles. This “invasion” marks how blurred the lines between the two genders have become, and it also symbolizes the invasion of women in all-male spheres of society. However, her presence does not go unnoticed by the narrator, who immediately calls her out as a “faker.” What is interesting to note here is that the narrator is just as “fake” as she is: neither of them actually have cancer, nor does the narrator give out his original name. Kuhn argues that Marla forces the narrator to “confront his own falseness,”<sup>139</sup> which is reflected in the fact that he cannot cry when she is around: “With her watching, I’m a liar...Marla, you

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>137</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. E.M Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1973), 301.

<sup>138</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 17.

<sup>139</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound,” 41.

big fake, you get out...I can't sleep with you here."<sup>140</sup> According to the narrator, she is "out to ruin another part of my life" as he contemplates all the friends he has lost to marriage since college.<sup>141</sup> Marla is then seen as an invader of privacy, not as a dying race as Chloe represents, but a "little warm center" of life equal to that of the narrator. However, Marla is the catalyst for the narrator's "breakdown" as she initiates his process of dealing with his inauthenticity.

Despite the importance of men, and the liminal role women have been designated in this novel, Marla Singer has been dealt a central role as noted by the narrator: "I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer."<sup>142</sup> So who is she? The narrator first introduces her as she enters the testicular support group, sporting "short matte black hair" and a veil of cigarette smoke.<sup>143</sup> As the men have been given feminine traits, Marla has been given masculine attributes such as short hair, bearing earring holes without earrings and the habit of smoking. Although given some masculine characteristics, she still possesses a "dark" femininity reflected in her "big eyes," her "skim milk thin, buttermilk sallow body" covered in a dress with "a wallpaper pattern of dark roses."<sup>144</sup> She is a cross between both genders, inhabiting traits from both lairs, making her very powerful as a character, as one sees evidently in the group therapy sessions and in the narrator's decision to sleep outside for the night in order to escape Marla's wrath:

We're sleeping in the car tonight ...  
Just in case Marla burns the house down.  
Just in case Marla goes out and finds a gun  
Just in case Marla is still in the house.<sup>145</sup>

Marla, seen as a hybrid form embodying both genders, acts as a challenge to traditional gender norms, which would explain both the narrator's and Tyler's feeling of threat towards her. Kuhn labels her as a "monster" and links her to the gothic tradition, which may be a suitable view to help illustrate Marla's challenge on binary gender norms. Gothic fiction, as with transgressive fiction, aims to "generate horror...and challenge limits,"<sup>146</sup> although in

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<sup>140</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 23-24.

<sup>141</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 62.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 88.

<sup>146</sup> Kuhn, "I Am Marla's Monstrous Wound," 36.

slightly different ways. While the gothic genre deals more with science fictional themes, mysteries, fairy tales and fantasy, both genres aim to “shock” its readers. Transgressive fiction, like gothic fiction, aims to explore topics often labeled as taboo such as sex, violence, pedophilia or incest with protagonists who feel trapped by society’s norms and expectations. In this, both genres aim to “challenge limits” albeit in unusual ways and through unusual characters who can be seen as people adhering to liminal groups in society. Thus, Marla represents that liminal character and challenges norms and expectations of society because she embodies both feminine and masculine qualities, acting as a “monster” in gothic terms. Punter and Byron argue: “hybrid forms that exceed and disrupt those systems of classification through which cultures organize experience, monsters problematize binary thinking and demand rethinking of the boundaries and concepts of normality.”<sup>147</sup> This hybridity shows, as Kuhn notes, when she calls out “look, I’m a mermaid”<sup>148</sup>, bearing in mind that mermaids physically have no genitalia, symbolizing a mix or a complete absence of sex, thus making gender hard to determine. The “monster,” Palahniuk mentions during an interview, is the symbol for something taboo, for talking about something society as a whole cannot talk about.<sup>149</sup> Marla is that monster because she challenges the traditional conceptions of what it is to be a woman and a man by embodying more masculinity than femininity. Tyler also becomes a kind of monster by becoming the protest against the muted maleness, against a new male not allowed to raise his voice, cuss or act out in any way. This confirms Palahniuk’s mission in breaking down the boundaries that separate and inhibit people to connect to one another.

Marla challenges traditional conceptions of gender norms by taking the role as *femme fatale*, in opposition to the story’s *l’homme fatale*, that being Tyler Durden. Kuhn points out that Marla challenges these norms by being “urban, alluring, threatening, non-maternal, and anti-domestic.”<sup>150</sup> For the narrator, she acts as a possible savior mirroring Tyler’s desire to “save” the narrator. As Tyler tries to “save” the narrator’s masculinity through self-destruction and bare-knuckle fighting, Marla offers the narrator a release from “the rigid markers of ‘masculinity’ in the form of crossing the boundaries of his gender, for example

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<sup>147</sup> David Punter and Dennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell:, 2006), 264.

<sup>148</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 99.

<sup>149</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, “Postcards from the Future, Chuck Palahniuk Q & A - The Death of "Transgressive" Fiction,” uploaded by andrewjrosa on April 23, 2007, accessed September 3, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0cLeXPIa8o>.

<sup>150</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound,” 42.

with cross-dressing (“Hats with veils. We could dress you up and sneak you around.”)<sup>151</sup>, presenting the narrator with an alternative route than the option opted by Tyler. Although one becomes aware that she is suicidal and wallows in self-loathing (calling herself “a monster bitch monster,”)<sup>152</sup>, fearing death and ultimately getting old, she’s [Marla] “worried that as she grows older, she’ll have fewer and fewer options,”<sup>153</sup> it only proves Marla is aware of her weaknesses in contrast to the narrator. She is also aware of the world they are currently living in, a society where the difference between life and death is almost invisible: “You’ll never hear anyone say ‘parasite.’ Everybody is always getting better” yet everyone “smiles with that invisible gun to their head.”<sup>154</sup> Marla is aware of this anesthesia to life, thus surrounding herself with “dying and death and loss and grief” in order to “feel every moment of life.”<sup>155</sup> Marla is not using the support groups to escape, like the narrator, she is using them as a means to give life meaning, to counteract the void. Because Marla is depicted as more confident and emotionally stronger than the narrator, her alternative world ultimately becomes what the narrator chooses.

From their first meeting, the narrator struggles with his relationship to Marla, seeing her first as a threat but ultimately as the reason for him to live. Kuhn makes an interesting observation stating that Marla can be, and is, perceived throughout the novel as the narrator’s “döppelganger.” “They are both morbid, obstinate, confused, anxious, and hungry for connection beneath their cynical exteriors.”<sup>156</sup> They both act as “tourists” in their own society: both work in a death-related field, and both handle liposuctioned fat, though for different purposes. One could also argue that the narrator also embodies the qualities of a hybrid, seeing as the narrator (the feminine) and Tyler (the masculine) are the same person. This distinction is not as clear until the ending where it is revealed that they are in fact one person, and have been the whole time. This does not make the relationship between Marla and the narrator a case of “opposites attract,” but rather an example of how neutralized genders and homogenized bodies come together and actually become the source of restored love in an anesthetic society: “‘Why should I believe any of this?’...I say, because I think I like you.”<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 173.

<sup>152</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 69.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 35, 19.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>156</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Mounstrous Wound,” 42.

<sup>157</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 197.

Affection and showing of affection is an issue that is brought up in this novel to shed light on post-modern society. As I have mentioned before, human contact has been completely removed from the body and rather projected on inanimate objects, creating an issue of artificiality in the culture. The distortion of gender norms has rendered desire of the 'other' mute, as the 'other' no longer exists. The void of emotion between the sexes is described in the narrator's re-caption of a letter written to a Dear Abby column:

I tell Marla about the woman...who married a handsome successful mortician and on their wedding night, he made her soak in a tub of ice water until her skin was freezing to the touch, and then made her lie in the bed completely still while he had intercourse with her cold, inert body.<sup>158</sup>

It may just seem like a morbid story, but the relationship between man and woman is further elaborated on when the narrator remarks at the end of the chapter that "the funny thing is this woman had done this as a newlywed and gone on to do it for the next ten years of marriage, and now she was writing to Dear Abby to ask if Abby thought it meant something."<sup>159</sup> The relationship stands as the literally "dead" connection between the two sexes perpetuated by a society that has warped the two genders. It is also visible in the narrator's father, who has turned marriage into a profitable business: "My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise."<sup>160</sup> Marla also signals the death of romantic love as she contrasts society's attitudes with the old, romantic fairytales: "...the condom is the glass slipper of our generation. You slip it on when you meet a stranger. You dance all night, then you throw it away."<sup>161</sup> Love, sentiments of affection and human connection are completely empty terms, and it is these terms that the narrator is really seeking, not a new masculine identity, as we remind ourselves of Palahniuk's ultimate goals for his stories and characters: to find ways in which characters can connect with each other. This is why Tyler and the world he brings with him fail; his world is loveless because to his primitive representation of gender, love, despite excessive sexual action, does not exist: "'Don't call this *love*.'"<sup>162</sup> Although one could claim that the narrator "loves" Tyler, the "love" is ultimately a "love" for a dream.

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<sup>158</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 106.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>162</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 62.

At first glance, the love, or connection, between the narrator and Marla might seem absent, however as I have pointed out previously, the narrator singles out Marla from the beginning as the reason for “the gun, the anarchy, the explosions...”<sup>163</sup> It is also evident that he subconsciously desires her on the basis of the creation of Tyler, although he is hesitant and insecure about entering into a relationship.<sup>164</sup> Marla is seen as an opposite to Tyler, thus meaning the opposite of what the narrator initially desires, however, she is not as different as she might seem. As I mentioned, the narrator and Marla mirror each other, and although Marla lacks the masculinity to become a member of Project Mayhem, she still wears the installed ‘sign of membership’ the brotherhood has: the lye kiss. Unlike the therapy groups where membership can be faked, the membership to the fight clubs is something that cannot be faked as it represents a “real” masculinity rooted in the body. Robinson points out that even Bob’s feminized body embodies this trait: “...whereas Bob can be said to ‘perform’ femininity...Marla cannot perform masculinity because...masculinity is that which cannot be performed or faked”<sup>165</sup> according to the book’s logic. However, as Kuhn points out, the lye kiss is making her again cross the threshold of “the masculine,” because she bears the insignia equal to all the other male members. This also shows “another instance of hybridity,” in Marla’s case; as she is able to both embody the feminine and the masculine.<sup>166</sup> This cross between feminine and masculine is also pointed out in her name by the narrator, mentioning that Marla “can be a guy’s name,” when Tyler had used her name for a library card.<sup>167</sup>

Marla’s important function in the novel becomes apparent when the narrator realizes that Tyler Durden is just a hallucination, and that the narrator is the one in control, after all. Marla is the catalyst for this epiphany, and also marks the beginning of something resembling human emotion “...I think I like you.” Kuhn explains further that “...not only is Marla the catalyst for the narrator’s split into Tyler, but also she is the catalyst his split *from* Tyler.”<sup>168</sup> The narrator explicitly explains this on page 198: “I know why Tyler occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla.” Because the gender roles were rendered mute, Tyler’s “solution” was to destroy them in order to break free of them, thus giving him the freedom to “have” Marla. Tyler was the

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>164</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound,” 41.

<sup>165</sup> Robinson, “Feminized Men and Inauthentic Women: *Fight Club* and the Limits of Anti-Consumerist Critique,” 6.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 89.

<sup>168</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound,” 44-45.

only solution the narrator could think of, something completely in opposition to the gendered, or non-gendered, situation he was held captive in. However, this solution did not provide the narrator with the necessary tools to be with her, but with Marla opposing to conform to categorization, she made the narrator “acknowledge his role in the production of the nightmarish situation,”<sup>169</sup> thus providing him with a means to escape and break free. Although Marla clearly states, “it’s not love or anything,” the sentiments, although meager, signal the break of barriers that were once upheld by gender norms previously expressed in the novel.

It is only after “the lover’s bodies become nearly unrecognizable as bodies,” Andrew Slade argues, that their love can emerge as the “fount and fruit of what we are encouraged to hope will become, in the end, a better world.”<sup>170</sup> However, this “happy ending” and its budding romance quickly deflate as the book enters its final chapter. Having just pulled the trigger and killing his alter ego and being united with his love interest, the romantic happiness of the situation is mocked by the Joker-like leer of the narrator, a smile not made of his own emotions but by the force of bare knuckles left from a fight. So what now? Did “pulling the trigger” on previous masculine ideals eradicate them, or did Tyler’s thoughts on “us being legends. We’ll never die,” have a prophetic effect? There is some ambiguity towards the location in the final chapter; although the narrator states he is in heaven talking to God, the descriptions of “rubber-soled shoes,” God taking notes on a pad” and people bringing him “paper cups with meds” are perhaps not descriptions taken directly from the Bible. We may assume that he has landed himself in the loony bin, making the scenario dreamlike and hard to actually believe is real. What is, however, apparent by this ending is that Tyler Durden’s legacy lives on as the workers stationed in “heaven” are seen with broken noses, stitches and black eyes, assuring the narrator that “everything’s going according to plan.”<sup>171</sup> Now, one cannot be sure whether or not this is also, as is the whole book, an illusion or hallucination; however, it is clear that it is not a happy ending. According to Jung, one must face death by symbolically killing one’s ego to resurrect into a more advanced identity, something clearly the narrator has done, though it can be discussed whether or not he has ascended into a higher being. He says “people write to me in heaven and tell me I’m remembered. That I’m their

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<sup>169</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound,” 44-45.

<sup>170</sup> Andrew Slade, “On Mutilation: The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk’s Fiction,” 67.

<sup>171</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 208.

hero,” which may signify that he has in fact transcended into something beyond his gender.<sup>172</sup> But although the narrator thinks he has set himself free from his Tyler Durden, it is clear that the young men still hold firm on the dream of ultimate masculinity that Durden represented, painting a most dismal picture of the never-ending search for a male identity. This is evident in that Tyler Durden is still a part of his identity as the guys working at the asylum identify him as Tyler: “We miss you Mr. Durden.” It might serve to illustrate a point Palahniuk made in an interview with Jeffrey Sartain, that “it’s never happy ever after, and the moment after the curtain comes down on even a happy ending, everything’s gonna go to shit.”<sup>173</sup>

## **I am Joe’s Virtual Vision:**

### **The Movie, David Fincher and Life Beyond Gender**

As stated in the beginning of the chapter, it was the release of David Fincher’s film *Fight Club* starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton that initiated the book’s success. The movie sparked interest in critics while also resonating deeply with the public. With real fight clubs emerging around the United States after the movie’s release, the masculine protest against a feminized consumer society and the erosion of gender differences clearly echoed ideas and thoughts in the audience. This, in fact, goes to show that Palahniuk was addressing a “monster” in society, something that had “diseased” the American society.<sup>174</sup> I will not do a full movie and novel compare/contrast section, seeing as the movie only further brilliantly illustrates the points raised in the book. However, I will be looking at the section in which they differ, namely the ending, and see whether it can further illustrate the breaking of gendered barriers or not.

As mentioned before, the novel ends on a confusing and dismal note as the narrator is arguably stuck at a mental hospital surrounded by “space monkeys” still eager to carry on the legacy of Tyler Durden. We are sure that he shot himself, though whether or not Tyler is still alive is uncertain. In the movie, however, there are some slight differences. The narrator shoots himself in the face, killing Tyler Durden, thus freeing himself from the part of him that was his alter ego. Then enters Marla and they stand hand-in-hand and watch the “fireworks,” as the buildings of major credit card companies are blown to bits.

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>173</sup> Jeff Sartain, “Interview with Chuck Palahniuk,” in *Strange Horizons*, 2006, 16. October, accessed September 19, 2012, <http://www.strangehorizons.com/2006/20061016/palahniuk-int-a.shtml>.

<sup>174</sup> Mendieta, “Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk,” 394-408.



The ending of the movie suggests two things: first, that Tyler's legacy is actually carried out and will probably continue, and second, that the narrator's relationship to Marla is carried out as well. What does this mean for the gendered perspective of the story? What happens after? In the novel it is unclear whether or not the traditional gendered society that Tyler Durden tried to restore survived or the "mixed"-gendered society Marla represented was carried on. The change into something "new" did not happen; the narrator is again alone as he was at the beginning of the book. However, in the movie, Tyler's legacy lives on in the symbolic detonation of the skyscrapers, and is almost celebrated as the destruction "pays tribute to the alter ego,"<sup>175</sup> which also means that Tyler's gendered vision lives on and will be executed. The "restoration of harmony" that is required to restore the "equilibrium," according to Todorov, has not happened as the world will continue to be destroyed in Durden's spirit. However, in an interview David Fincher mentions that Tyler is only an ideal, meaning he can "deal with concepts of our lives in an idealistic fashion, but it doesn't have anything to do with the compromises of real life as modern man knows it."<sup>176</sup> Therefore Tyler was unnecessary and had to be killed because he was not needed. The ending reveals, as Fincher himself says, that he [the narrator] has "learned a lesson," and realizes that "life is not about killing off your ideals," prompting him to begin his own life.<sup>177</sup> This contradicts the claims of Robinson, and sides with the Classical Hollywood Cinema (CHC) narrative. These are narratives that have dominated Hollywood's movie franchise, in which the ending is often in favor of the hero. The ending seems also to be uplifting for the audience and gives hope that the conflict that arose has been solved. The narrator is moving on to something new and better. It seems this is the ending David Fincher chose, seeing as the ending in the novel depicts the "hero" as insane and defeated, and thus would be defeating for his audience and not resonate with the American culture of "broken men" in the need of a cure. In the movie, the narrator rises after shooting himself in the head saying "I'm fine, I'm fine" after shooting off half his face, portraying himself as the stoic individual who "won," but really only bringing to mind the Black Knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* sillily claiming it was "just a flesh wound," when assessing his limbless body after a sword fight.

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<sup>175</sup> Robinson, "Feminized Men and Inauthentic Women: *Fight Club* and the Limits of Anti-Consumerist Critique," 22.

<sup>176</sup> Gavin Smith, "Inside Out: Gavin Smith Goes One-on-One with David Fincher," *Film Comment*, 35 (5), September–October 1999, pp. 58–68, accessed September 7, 2012, <http://www.edward-norton.org/fc/articles/filmcom.html>.

<sup>177</sup> Guido Henkel, "David Fincher: Fighting the Odds," interview, accessed September 7, 2012, [http://www.dvdreview.com/html/dvd\\_review\\_-\\_david\\_fincher.shtml](http://www.dvdreview.com/html/dvd_review_-_david_fincher.shtml).

The movie ending also portrays the budding romance forming between the narrator and Marla. Seeing as Marla represents an androgynous society, this uniting of hands can be interpreted as a “uniting” of the two genders, therefore allowing the narrator to step out of traditional gender roles and enter into a “new” world, whatever that may hold. Fincher claims that the narrator comes to the realization that finally there is “someone who understands him,” seeing the “doppelgänger” affect Marla has had on him throughout the movie.<sup>178</sup>

Both the novel and the movie embody the quality of exploring life beyond gender and without gender boundaries. Although both endings end in a somewhat open way and do not provide the reader or viewer with any solution to the problems addressed to gender, it is clear they have had an effect on the public. Some unspoken rules are broken and the material transgressed. Palahniuk mentions in an interview with Jeffrey Sartain that the American standard for success is to transgress, to “break the rules, or find a place where the rules aren’t there yet.”<sup>179</sup> It is then interesting to look upon the field of gender; a field where the rules are not set in stone, thus leaving writers and others to explore these liquid boundaries further. This is exactly what Palahniuk does in *Fight Club*, and he continues to attack the imaginary boundaries of gender, perhaps more vociferously and viciously in *Invisible Monsters* than *Fight Club*, as he tackles the intersecting aspects of gender identity and sexuality.

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<sup>178</sup> Guido Henkel, “David Fincher: Fighting the Odds,” interview.

<sup>179</sup> Jeff Sartain, “Interview with Chuck Palahniuk,” *Strange Horizons*, 2006, 16. Okt.

## Chapter 2: Invisible Monsters

The fashion photographer inside my head yells:  
Give me pity.  
Flash.  
Give me another chance.  
Flash...  
Come on, let's see those glistening innards, Bubba Joan... Tell us a gross  
personal story.<sup>180</sup>

Before *Fight Club*, Palahniuk wrote a story about a young fashion model, tired of her life as a beautiful woman, who set out on an adventure to escape the addiction of prettiness. The first draft of the story was written in “a Laundromat,” where “the only magazines to read were like *Savvy* and *Mademoiselle*” with “60,000 adjectives before you find the word sweater at the end,” to which Palahniuk thought: “Why couldn’t I write a book in this language?”<sup>181</sup> His thought materialized into the novel *Invisible Monsters*, published in 1999, after a *Fight Club* obsession that had plagued America since its publication in 1996. Although it was published after *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters* was actually Palahniuk’s second written book, the first being *Insomnia: If You Lived Here, You’d be Home Already*. However, the publishers found *Invisible Monsters* to be too disturbing and rejected it. After the dismissal from the publishers, Palahniuk channeled his anger of rejection into writing about destroying capitalist America in *Fight Club*. The book was published on the second attempt after the success of *Fight Club* and was well received amongst critics, who deemed it “gutsy, terse and cunning,” a “twisted soap opera that not only desensitized individuals would find funny,” leaving them wondering if Palahniuk was “either crazy or a genius.”<sup>182</sup> What is interesting to not in this context, is why the story was rejected in the first place. What was so disturbing about it that the publishers didn’t dare expose it to the American public? One explanation for this rejection could lie in the review from *New City* in which Palahniuk is referred to as “breaking all rules and conventions, like he never learned them.”<sup>183</sup> Not only does he experiment with

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<sup>180</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1999), 41 & 88.

<sup>181</sup> Dennis Widmyer, “Chuck on *Invisible Monsters*,” 2012, accessed October 8, 2012. <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/books/invisible-monsters>.

<sup>182</sup> Palahniuk, Preface in *Invisible Monsters*, 2-3.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

chronology in the novel, but Palahniuk also experiments, in extreme ways, with concepts of identity formation and destruction in a postmodern urban culture.<sup>184</sup>

Eduardo Mendieta argues that “Palahniuk’s novels are attempts at surviving American culture,” meaning American culture has developed a “sickness” in which Palahniuk offers a diagnosis and cure.<sup>185</sup> This sickness, as was shown in *Fight Club*, has all to do with authenticity and the lack of it in post-modern American culture. Andrew Slade argues that Palahniuk’s writing “centers on the mutilation of bodies,” where “the human body is the site for the inscription of a search for modes of authentic living in a world where the differences between the fake and the genuine have ceased to function.”<sup>186</sup> The body, then, is a site for transition, change, and rediscovery of what is authentic and what is artificial. For Palahniuk, the body is also the site for challenging traditional conceptions that were previously determined by ideologies of biology, such as sex and sexual identity. In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk showed through self-mutilation how gender was determined and ultimately decided by the individual, thus illustrating the fallacy of equating biological sex with cultural sex. The body in *Fight Club* was used as an identity and power marker as the sexes battled for dominance, and the same can be said for *Invisible Monsters*. The book specifically attacks traditional conceptions of sexual identity, claiming that it is not static, but rather fluid, flexible and ultimately solely in the individual’s power, as Brandy Alexander points out: “When you understand...that what you’re telling is just a story...then we’ll figure out who you’re going to be.”<sup>187</sup> Because identity, beauty, appearance and gender formation in this story are so tightly bound to mass production, individuality ceases to exist and entrapment ensues. The cure then would be that of breaking the fixed rules that determine identity and gender in order to escape said boundaries, that are creating disconnectedness and distance between the characters.

In this chapter I will again argue that Palahniuk is trying to bridge the gap of differences that has been created by a gendered society by playing and stretching the boundaries of the binary categories. The search for freedom and escape from isolation and loneliness is evident in Palahniuk’s characters, and it is perhaps more prevalent in *Invisible*

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<sup>184</sup> The original chronology was structured like a woman’s magazine where one jumps from page to page, backwards and forwards, though the publishers changed this when it came out in 1999. However, in 2012 a new version, *Invisible Monsters Remix*, was published with the original chronology.

<sup>185</sup> Mendieta, “Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk,” 394.

<sup>186</sup> Slade, “On Mutilation: The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk’s Fiction,” 64.

<sup>187</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 61.

*Monsters* than in *Fight Club* how Palahniuk criticizes our society of labels and boxes that separate instead of unite; how selling your body creates your identity, but also that your identity creates your body. With this gendered perspective, I will be looking at how Palahniuk attacks the binary categories of gender and sexual identity, and show how he goes beyond their limits by asking questions such as “what happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the regime of truth?”<sup>188</sup> It seems prevalent that Palahniuk’s ‘remedy’ for the ‘gendered sickness’ that is spreading in post-modern America is to go beyond the body and its limits in order to restore connection and individuality. In regards to this, I will claim that like so many other gender theorists before me, there are more than two genders as traditional views have it, and I will also be looking at non-conformity and how the disavowal of “normal” helps to unite the characters in the novel.

### **Bubba-Joan GotHerJawShotOff:**

#### **Shannon, Beauty and Hyperreality**

Similar to the world in which *Fight Club* takes place, the world of *Invisible Monsters* is set in the post-modern American middle class, in a dismal society where beauty comes first and the hopes for a future have dwindled away: “This was everything we should’ve inherited: the whole man on the moon...fossil-fueled world of Space Age where you could go up to meet the Jetsons’ flying saucer...This is how our lives were supposed to turn out.”<sup>189</sup> However, it did not turn out that way. As with *Fight Club*, Palahniuk’s disappointment in society is prevalent in *Invisible Monsters*; American culture and society have turned to navel-gazing and people have lost themselves to “staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in a monitor,” reminiscent of the “copy of a copy” existence in *Fight Club*,<sup>190</sup> creating an anesthetic existence. Like in *Fight Club*, humans have been reduced to products or goods meant to fill a mechanical function in society, as the simulacra has taken over the body, removing it from anything original: “You’re a product...A product of a product of a product...*Nothing of me is original. I am the combined effort of everybody I’ve ever known.*”<sup>191</sup> The results are a society without individual faces, a mass of the

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<sup>188</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 58.

<sup>189</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 98.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>191</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 104 & 217.

replication of the same face and the hunger for similarity, which in turn and paradoxically leads to disconnectedness.

However, the muted reality in *Fight Club* is radically different to the reality we are met with in *Invisible Monsters*. While Palahniuk seems to criticize consumer culture in *Fight Club*, the areas under attack in *Invisible Monsters* seem to be the entertainment business, and how “reality TV” and the celebrity culture have become the new lifestyle to emulate. Even plastic surgery has become popular entertainment, thanks to TV shows such as *Extreme Makeover* and *Nip/Tuck*, giving viewers the pleasure of witnessing the surgeons’ reassurance of “perfect beauty” to their patients. However, the reality of the matter, as Virginia Blum points out, is that surgeons “talk at length about tailoring the change to the individual. But then I look at their own work, and all their patients as well look like members of a not-so-extended family.” Blum further argues that the heart of the problem is the acceptance of a homogenized beauty standard.<sup>192</sup> The narrator of *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon MacFarland, is the symbol of this homogenized beauty standard as she works as a fashion model. As the narrator in *Fight Club* is his job and his furniture, Shannon is her face, thus she is only surface, and aching for a spot in the limelight. Although her job and her looks give her the much wanted attention that she needs, Shannon seems to be aware of the level of artificiality to her life and her work, for example when she reminisces about her and Evie’s small family dramas in Brumbach’s Department Store: “...Evie and me, we’d star in our own personal unnatural habitat... We’d soak up all the attention in our own little matinee life.”<sup>193</sup> Attention, eyes watching, equals post-modern reality’s form for recognition – to be seen means you exist, as Evie notes: “It’s too lonely at my real house...and I hate how I don’t feel real enough unless people are watching.”<sup>194</sup> Although Evie embraces the attention, Andrew Johnson notes that “Shannon grows tired of it,” and “begins to see the ridiculous role she and Evie play in the construction of beauty culture,”<sup>195</sup> similar to the realization the narrator of *Fight Club* goes through after creating Tyler in order to escape his entrapment from an inauthentic lifestyle.

The inauthenticity of homogenized beauty, and “how valueless their real selves become in the process,” reveals itself through the various job assignments Shannon has as a

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<sup>192</sup> Virginia Blum, *Flesh Wounds* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>193</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 70.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>195</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades: Narcissism and Violence in *Invisible Monsters*,” 62.

model.<sup>196</sup> Wearing “Bibo Kelley stainless steel party dresses” in a slaughterhouse where carcasses fly past in “a hundred pigs per hour,” and “Herman Mancing thong swimwear” on top of wrecked cars, Shannon displays “ugly fashion” in uglier places in order to make the garment sell.<sup>197</sup> Although these examples display the meaninglessness of Shannon’s life as a lifeless mannequin, perhaps the most significant and symbolic assignment she has is the infomercial for the Num Num Snack factory: a contraption for grinding meat by-products together to produce small snacks. Shannon comments that the infomercial is “one of those television commercials you think is a real program except it’s just a thirty-minute pitch,” commenting on the “realistic aspects of the commercial: you think it is real, but it is not.”<sup>198</sup> Johnson notes that the “reality” of the infomercial “has the quality of a nightmare,” as everything is “enlarged, maximized to create a bizarre hyper-reality,”<sup>199</sup> something we see in the descriptions of Evie with “contact lenses too green”, lips “heavy red outside the natural lip line,” and Manus with “his handsome square-jawed face,” “power blue eyes,” and “thick black hair” which “reminds you how people’s hair is just vestigial fur with mousse on it.”<sup>200</sup> Chung Chin-Yi states that hyperreality is a state where the “consciousness loses its ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, and begins to engage with the latter without understanding what it is doing,” as we see an example of in Shannon and Evie’s scenes in Brumbach’s.<sup>201</sup> The nature of hyperreality, Chin-Yi continues, is characterized by “enhancement” of reality, as we see in the infomercial; their features become *too colorful, too real*, yet it produces an effect of fascination in the audience. Chin-Yi explains this by saying that the viewing of reality TV is “an exercise of ‘desiring to be seen’ and desiring the Other to return our gaze,” which is interesting when seen in connection with the “eerie” feeling of the audience “staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in the monitor.”<sup>202</sup> This is because, as Baudrillard argues, “the spectator, rather than desiring difference from others, desires sameness with the subjects that witnessed on television...all that matters now is to resemble

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<sup>196</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades: Narcissism and Violence in Invisible Monsters,” 62.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 241 & 163-164.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>199</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades,” 63.

<sup>200</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 118.

<sup>201</sup> Chung Chin-Yi, “Hyperreality, the Question of Agency, and the Phenomenon of Reality Television,” *Nebula*, (4:1), 2007 Mar, 31-48 (Electronic publication.), (2007), 31.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 32.

oneself, to find oneself everywhere, multiplied but loyal to one's formula."<sup>203</sup> What we are looking for when we look at the screen is ourselves, searching endlessly for "me" but failing to find it, thus struggling to live up to the beauty images presented on the screen. The result of this is that one is enticed into this circle of looking, not ever tuning out, because "the moment the monitor goes black, you're looking at yourself, not smiling, not anything."<sup>204</sup>

Perhaps the most symbolic image of the homogenized beauty ideal is that of the actual Num Num Snack factory machine: "...the Num Num Snack Factory takes meat by-products...your tongues or hearts or lips or genitals – chews them up, and poops them out in the shape of a spade or a diamond or a club onto your choice of cracker for you to eat yourself."<sup>205</sup> The machine then becomes the symbol for the fashion industry, and how the industry takes the individual and makes them into homogenized products. Johnson also suggests that "for you to eat yourself" can be read cannibalistically as consumers feasting on themselves, a similar symbol to the soap that appears in *Fight Club*, or the endless circle of creating expectation of an ideal and then never fulfilling that beauty ideal because it is not fulfillable. Alexandra Howson states that "consumer culture encourages the view that, through the application of technology and information, the body can be endlessly modified," either surgically or by the hand of an editor, and it is with these tools and the notion of the body as "an unfinished product," that gives the beauty culture its power to mold its consumers.<sup>206</sup>

In the post-modern society of America Palahniuk is presenting, beauty has become everything, and so much so that it produces a trap for individuals, as Shannon says: "The truth is I was addicted to being beautiful."<sup>207</sup> Beauty, then, functions as a means to authenticate the subject, seen in the lengths to which Shannon (and others) go in order to maintain their beauty for means of being recognized in society. As Andrew Ng argues: "*Invisible Monsters* explores the powerful interpellation of bodies by late capitalism to the point that only embodying

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<sup>203</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, in "Hyperreality, the Question of Agency, and the Phenomenon of Reality Television," *Nebula*, (4:1), 2007 Mar, 31-48 (Electronic publication.), 34.

<sup>203</sup> Chin-Yi, "Hyperreality, the Question of Agency, and the Phenomenon of Reality Television," 32.

<sup>204</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, Foreword in *Invisible Monsters Remix* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2012), vi.

<sup>205</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 120.

<sup>206</sup> Alexandra Howson, *The Body In Society: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 99.

<sup>207</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 285.



certain 'labels' can the body have significance.”<sup>208</sup> However, as the body is seen as self-decomposing, then “beauty, absolute and unassailable,” is ultimately “unreachable and elusive, a mythology.”<sup>209</sup> The subject is sent on a wild goose chase in order to maintain authenticity, which is recognized as a futile and impossible task; beauty as a means of authentication is then rendered a label without significance. Furthermore, seeing as the masses search for the same homogenized beauty ideal, individuality is pushed to the side along with authenticity, as Brandy points out: “Whatever you’re thinking, a million other folks are thinking, Whatever you do, they’re doing. All of you is a cooperative effort.”<sup>210</sup> The trap is unavoidable, because “anything we want, we’re trained to want;” “we’re so trapped that any way we could imagine to escape would be just another part of the trap.”<sup>211</sup> The consumer culture and beauty industry has become a catch-22 in which Shannon finds herself: in an endless loop of self-worshipping, a state without individuality or the ability to obtain personal growth, but with a growing sense of loneliness.

Like the narrator in *Fight Club* feels trapped by his consumer nesting behavior, stuck in a loop of inauthentic behavior, Shannon feels trapped by her own body and her addiction to it which, in turn, produces inauthentic behavior. As with the inauthentic emotions emoted by the narrator in *Fight Club* in the group therapy sessions, Shannon too has trouble experiencing real emotions. This can be seen in her constant mental image of a fashion photographer dictating how she should feel, rather than emoting authentic emotions: “Flash. Give me malice. Flash. Give me detached existentialist ennui.”<sup>212</sup> As also becomes clear for the narrator in *Fight Club*, Shannon realizes that it is because of her neglected childhood that she yearns for love and attention, thus naturally gravitating to a career in modeling.

Though, one significant factor that binds the two narrators together is that they are both prisoners of their own gender.<sup>213</sup> While the narrator/Tyler Durden are both stuck in their opposite extreme spectra of masculinity, Shannon is trapped in her feminine gender and the

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<sup>208</sup> Andrew Ng, “Destruction and the Discourse of Deformity: Invisible Monsters and the Ethics of Atrocity,” 25.

<sup>209</sup> Mendieta, “Surviving American Culture on Chuck Palahniuk,” 399.

<sup>210</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 218.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>213</sup> Jane Flax, “Postmodernism and Gender relations in feminist theory,” in *Feminisms*, ed. Sandra Kemp & Judith Squires (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1997), 175. Originally in *Signs: Journal of Women in culture and society*, 12/4 (University of Chicago, 1987), 621-43.

limits of said gender in the sense that she must always struggle to be beautiful, to always be “an infinity of desires but [signify] nothing on her own”:<sup>214</sup>

I was tired of staying a lower life form just because of my looks...Never getting anything real accomplished, but getting the attention and recognition anyway. Trapped in a beauty ghetto was how I felt...Fuck me. I'm so tired of being me. Me beautiful. Me ugly. Me blonde. A million fucking fashion makeovers that only leave me trapped being me.<sup>215</sup>

Shannon's ultimate desire is freedom to be more than what her gender dictates, or what her body dictates of her, thus she sets out to destroy these boundaries with the simple desire in mind: “People would see my art, what I made instead of just how I looked, and people would love me.”<sup>216</sup> But how do you escape being beautiful? How do you escape being you, only blond and beautiful? You decide that the opposite of beauty and anesthesia is ugliness and growth, and slowly shoot off your face.

Like the creation of Tyler Durden was a means for escape from gender-entrapment for the *Fight Club* narrator, likewise is the self-mutilated act that renders Shannon without identity. This, however, opens up the “possibility of subverting culture's domination in order to reassert itself [Shannon] as identity.”<sup>217</sup> Similar to Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory “Beauty is the spell over spell, which develops upon it,”<sup>218</sup> the only way for Shannon to break free is to “fuck up so badly [she] can't save [herself.]”<sup>219</sup> Shannon's addiction to beauty goes beyond visage as she remarks, “Beauty is power the same way money is power the same way a gun is power,”<sup>220</sup> echoing Pierre Bourdieu's idea that the body carries social capital.<sup>221</sup> By destroying her beauty - her identity markers - Shannon “takes control of her body as social capital,” while at the same time challenging the formation of identity in a postmodern culture by starting with a clean slate, not letting her body dictate her identity but instead letting her

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<sup>214</sup> Ng, “Destruction and the Discourse of Deformity,” 29.

<sup>215</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 286 & 224.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>217</sup> Ng, “Destruction and Discourse of Deformity,” 26.

<sup>218</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum: 2002), 47.

<sup>219</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 224.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>221</sup> Alexandra Howson, *The Body in Society: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 101.

identity form her body.<sup>222</sup> This “return to ground zero,” or “hitting rock bottom” as Durden would say, is something that is frequently used in Palahniuk’s works. In *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden’s philosophy is to destroy everything beautiful in order to restore the world the way it was supposed to be, thus he destroys the narrator’s apartment in order for him to detach himself from the things that were keeping him from leading an authentic life. The same can be said of Shannon as she, after her accident, has hit rock bottom: “...I have to eat baby food...I can’t talk. I have no career. I have no home. My fiancé left me. Nobody will look at me. I’m invisible.”<sup>223</sup> As Johnson notes, Shannon knows “real change must go beyond skin,” which in turn requires “drastic permanent alteration of beauty,” in order to invoke personal growth.<sup>224</sup> Simply a tattoo or a piercing would not suffice as she would “always be tempted to go back” to the narcissistic loop society was forcing her into. Ultimately, what Shannon needs to know is that somebody loves her, who will listen to her story and give her the attention her brother Shane and his accident stole from her childhood, which sparked the narcissism in the first place. By hitting rock bottom, Shannon starts with a clean slate but needs help in order to not slip back into her narcissistic old ways, which she almost does a couple of times when she auditions as a hand and foot model.<sup>225</sup> She also needs to reconnect with others, something her beauty and gender-trap had banned her from doing. The growth starts with a note of plea at a plastic surgery hospital to a person with Plumbago lips: “save me, I write, and wave it in Brandy’s face. I write: please.”<sup>226</sup>

## **Planet Brandy Alexander:**

### **Shane/Brandy, Performativity and Pain**

Cue to the ultimate queen supreme, Miss Brandy Alexander, savior of “sad-assed stories” and founder of the “Brandy Alexander Witness Reincarnation Project.”<sup>227</sup> Shannon first meets Brandy outside the speech therapist office at the hospital after her “accident”: “...just inside the open office doorway, boom, Brandy Alexander was just so there, glorious in her Princess Alexander pose, in an iridescent Vivienne Westwood cat suit changing colors with her every

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<sup>222</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades,” 68.

<sup>223</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 59 & 45.

<sup>224</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades,” 68.

<sup>225</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 219.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

move.”<sup>228</sup> From this little excerpt, one can notice that this character has a certain ambiguity when it comes to asserting gender based on common gender markers such as name and appearance. The name Brandy Alexander consists of a mix between feminine and masculine: Brandy being traditionally a girl’s name, and Alexander a boy’s name, linking to the famous male conqueror Alexander the Great. The title “conqueror” becomes more significant in regards to gender as the character is fully revealed; I will come back to this. Also, the seemingly juxtaposed name of Princess and Alexander put together reveals an indistinctness towards gender identification, and this fluidity is transferred to the clothes she is wearing which are constantly “changing colors” like a chameleon, as Shannon observes of Brandy: “She changed color from every angle. She turned green with my one step. Red with my next.”<sup>229</sup>

With Brandy, Palahniuk is playing with über-femininity by exaggerating her female features, displaying a “foot-long index finger” with “six cocktail rings stacked on,”<sup>230</sup> and dressing her in fancy designer clothing. This results in admiration from Shannon because Brandy is everything Shannon has lost: her beauty, her self-worth and her identity. In essence, Brandy Alexander is the embodiment of the post-modern beauty ideal; her body and identity all fabricated to the point that she looks like a real live Barbie doll with a sixteen-inch waist. Even her name is made up of products, such as the liquor Brandy, with Brandy Alexander being a cocktail mix, and a product of fashion designer Alexander McQueen. In this regard, Brandy is the ultimate representative for the post-modern *pastiche* in both senses of the word, being both a mix-match of different original products produced by others and a tongue-in-cheek imitation of the homogenized beauty ideal in a post-modern society. By making Brandy a symbol for this, Palahniuk shows the artificiality of this ideal by making Brandy unreal and almost cartoon-like: “...the eyes are too aubergine. Even these colors are too garish right now, too saturated, too intense. Lurid. You think of cartoon characters. Nothing is left to your imagination.”<sup>231</sup>

The world to which Brandy introduces Shannon, is a world with endless possibilities; a planet in which the most boring thing is “nudity,” the second most boring thing is “honesty,” with the third most boring thing on Planet Brandy Alexander being “your sorry-

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<sup>228</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 43.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

assed past.”<sup>232</sup> In many ways emulating several of Tyler Durden’s ideas and thoughts, Brandy believes in the power of creating your own world because in a world where “there isn’t any real *you* in you” and “Who you are moment to moment...is just a story,”<sup>233</sup> one might as well go along with the scheme and use the artificiality to one’s own advantage.<sup>234</sup> Brandy, then, acts as a “savior” for Shannon; she creates Shannon’s new life by telling her “everything [she] needs to know about [herself].”<sup>235</sup> Brandy, then, constructs the identity of Daisy St. Patience, who turns into Miss Arden Scotia, who turns into Miss Kay MacIsaac, all in the spirit of a locus of identity based on social construction in the form of brand names.<sup>236</sup> It is also interesting to note how Brandy is able to construct these multiple personalities; in a society where “everybody [is] shoulder to shoulder” and “people [know] everything about you at first glance” the mystique is gone, the power of not knowing is gone.<sup>237</sup> Thus Brandy introduces the veil: “...a good veil is your tinted limousine window... Behind a good veil you could be anyone...’Don’t worry,’ Brandy says. ‘Other people will fill in the blanks.’”<sup>238</sup> Cynthia Kuhn comments that the veil is a much-used Gothic symbol of “the space between the knowable and the unknowable,” meaning a space for “ambiguous demarcations of margins.”<sup>239</sup> However freeing this notion of ambiguity is, by veiling Shannon and letting society “fill in the blanks,” Brandy is removing autonomous power of the construction of identity from the individual to the masses. This only confirms the power culture has, where “contemporary America cannot act independently because the context of his thinking is foreclosed by the interest of society,”<sup>240</sup> a power which Brandy represents. As the novel unravels, it becomes apparent that Brandy represents everything Shannon has tried to kill off.

Brandy’s gender ambiguity is confirmed when it is revealed that she is in fact Shannon’s long dead, gay brother Shane. Shane’s face got mutilated in a hairspray accident, which caused his parents to give him extra love and attention. However, he was thrown out of

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<sup>232</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 112.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 41 & 173, 88.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>236</sup> Sherry R. Truffin, “This is what passes for free will: Chuck Palahniuk’s Postmodern Gothic,” in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 79.

<sup>237</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 108.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound,” 43.

<sup>240</sup> David Simmons and Nicola Allen, “Survivor and Haunted as a Critique of ‘The Culture Industry,’” in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 121.

the house when his parents found out he had contracted an STD from a male police officer. Later, a phone call told them that Shane had died of AIDS. However, Shane had not died, but instead been taken under the wing of the Rhea sisters, who gave him a complete gender-makeover: "...she had laser surgery to thin her vocal chords and then her trachea shave. She had her scalp advanced...we paid for her brow shave to get rid of the bone ridge above her eyes that the Miss Male used to have. We paid for her jaw contouring and her forehead feminization."<sup>241</sup> Brandy's entire gender and identity is formed through plastic surgery, linking the creation of gender to something created from social construction and something that is not defined by biological limitations, thus confirming her embodiment of the culture industry's commandments for obtaining and creating beauty. The image of this "unnatural" creation of identity and gender is mentioned through the passage about the creation of Eve. Brandy says: "'The doctors, they took out the bottom rib on each side of my chest...There's something in the Bible about taking out your ribs.' The creation of Eve."<sup>242</sup> On one hand this signifies that in order for Brandy to become a woman (in a biblical sense, and also to match the beauty culture's feminine ideals of a thin waist), she must take out two of her ribs. Seeing as Brandy is biologically male, this makes perfect sense biblically, she must take out her ribs from her male body in order to create the feminine Brandy Alexander. However, with Brandy actually looking and acting (performing) as a woman, the scene depicts the process of removing something natural, creating something fabricated, in order to be more "womanly."

Although Brandy's appearance and manner is in a sense "fabricated," Shane/Brandy is indeed the conqueror of new lands by going beyond the body in ways just as extreme as his sister. Johnson argues that Shane's journey also begins in narcissism, and in a rejected childhood.<sup>243</sup> As with Shannon, Shane felt a sense of disconnect and meaninglessness in "being a normal average kid," and wanted "something to save [him]...the opposite of a miracle."<sup>244</sup> It turns out that the "hairspray-accident" which caused Shane's mutilated face was self-inflicted, just as his sister's gunshot wounds were. This, Andrew Ng argues, was done to escape from "her[Shane's] family and the current story of her life (gay, rejected)," thus rejecting "the 'I' fashioned for him by society."<sup>245</sup> Because s/he was rejected for being gay, Shane/Brandy set out on her/his own task of breaking out of all labels assigned by

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<sup>241</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 177.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid, 196.

<sup>243</sup> Johnson, "Bullets and Blades," 66.

<sup>244</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 282.

<sup>245</sup> Ng, "Destruction and Discourse of Deformity," 30-31.

society, with the mission of showing their ridiculousness and disconnecting traits, and to ultimately go beyond labels and beyond the body: “I’m not straight, I’m not gay...I’m not bisexual. I want out of labels. I don’t want my whole life crammed into a single word.”<sup>246</sup> By transforming himself into a woman, Shane is escaping the labels attached to his assigned gender, and in turn revolts against a society built on categories and labels in order to function but which only ultimately works to separate and not unite, which did indeed separate him physically and emotionally from his family. Also, the fact that Shane is turning into Brandy, a woman being molded after society’s beauty standards stand as a mockery against the system it is following because Brandy is really Shane, the character of Brandy stands as a satirical character in which enhances the ridiculousness of this post-modern society’s beauty ideal. By challenging the conceptions of beauty and gender, s/he is also treading into new territory, as s/he seeks “something else, unknowable, some place to be that’s not on the map. A real adventure.”<sup>247</sup> In a gendered land, Brandy Alexander is the reincarnation of Alexander the Great, conquering new borders of experiencing and assigning, or lack of assigning, gender. Andrew Ng argues that Brandy’s transformation “is not an attempt to redesign gender,” but rather just an attempt to escape labels.<sup>248</sup>

Still, are Brandy’s actions not a means of challenging the binary gender system, thus implicitly seeking a reassignment of them by debauching both categories completely? In a sense, Shane’s transformation to Brandy makes a point of mocking both categories of male and female, signifying their destructive power in society, rather than positive and constructive powers. Like in *Fight Club*, Palahniuk demonstrates the ridiculousness of a society based on limiting gender norms, whether or not it is dominated by the masculine (*Fight Club*) or feminine (*Invisible Monsters*). In a sense, Brandy/Shane also represents the notion of a “third” gender, being in a body that is biologically one sex, but “performing” another. Performativity of gender, as defined by Butler, revolves around “the way in which the anticipation of gendered essence produces that which it posits itself as outside itself,” meaning that anticipation of gender ultimately creates what it anticipates.<sup>249</sup> The post-modern society anticipates a certain gender identity and homogenous beauty ideal, thus creating Brandy Alexander. Brandy is in essence a creation of what society expects the beauty ideal to look

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<sup>246</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 261.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ng, “Destruction and Discourse of Deformity,” 26.

<sup>249</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

like: “torpedo breasts,” “billowing piles of auburn hair” and “thick moist lips.”<sup>250</sup> Butler continues by stating that performativity involves a “repetition and a ritual, which achieves its naturalization in the context of a body, understood...as a culturally sustained temporal duration.”<sup>251</sup> What we then understand as our “internal” gender is performed through various acts, as Brandy is doing through her clothes, make-up and mannerism. However, seeing as Brandy is in fact biologically and emotionally a man, but her exterior being that of a woman, this character is playing with “gender reality.” The “reality of gender, then, is “put into crisis,” in which one comes to understand as “real,” “the naturalized knowledge of gender,” is ultimately “a changeable and revisable reality.”<sup>252</sup> In essence, by performing Brandy but being Shane, s/he challenges both the conception of reality in a post-modern society, the struggle between the “real” and the “fake” in hyperreality, but ultimately s/he also challenges the binary categories of man/woman through her/his play with genders.

The task of challenging the binary categories, a “real adventure,” as Andrew Ng points out, is located on her body, which has become the locus of power struggle between the individual and society in post-modern America.<sup>253</sup> To achieve this adventure, the characters must transcend the rules, and the pathway to this transcendence goes through self-mutilation and pain. Like Shannon, and many of Palahniuk’s characters, the tool of self-mutilation is used as a means for “identity [to] become personalized as authentic experience,”<sup>254</sup> to achieve authenticity and recognition as an individual. In *Fight Club*, the narrator (and the young men) gained recognition, autonomy and freedom through bare-knuckle fighting and burning their hands with lye, equal to Shannon’s achievement of freedom and autonomy through shooting herself in the face. Like the narrators, Tyler Durden and Shannon, Shane learns that the only way to free oneself from the entrapment of narcissism and labels is to embrace their worst fears, and let go of holding oneself as a “precious little prize:” “Our real discoveries come from chaos,” Brandy yells, “from going to the place that looks wrong and stupid.”<sup>255</sup> Shane endures the physical pain of transformation through liposuction, silicone, brow shaves, thinning of vocal chords, hormone therapy and electrolysis in order for her body to “come

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<sup>250</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 25.

<sup>251</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., xxiii & xxiv.

<sup>253</sup> Ng, “Destruction and Discourse of Deformity,” 26.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 258.



alive” and to seek a “reclamation of an ‘identity.’”<sup>256</sup> By reconstructing her body, Brandy achieves two things, according to Andrew Ng: to simultaneously construct and deconstruct the beauty ideal, while at the same time achieving difference through sameness. Ng explains that although Brandy “clearly subscribes to the notion of beauty prescribed by the culture industry, her subscription is also to escape this very prescription by exposing ‘beauty’ for its slippery, numinous quality.”<sup>257</sup> As Brandy Alexander, Shane transcends the notion of femininity and at the same time mocks the beauty ideals by becoming a “woman-in-excess” as a way of “circumventing labels,”<sup>258</sup> and showing the artificiality that lies in those beauty ideals created by society. Bound by the limitations of his labels – man, son, gay – Shane stages his own death in order to escape them and then reconstructs an entirely new identity from scratch through painstakingly self-disfiguring acts. Like Shannon, the need to achieve personal growth calls for drastic measures and invokes the notion of rebirth. Lucy Huskinson explains that violence “in which the ego is effectively torn apart” is required in order to be “born anew.”<sup>259</sup> She further explains that violence is not malign, nor destructive, but necessary for “the ego’s continual improvement by disrupting its misguided orientations.”<sup>260</sup> Andrew Slade also comments that the violence presented in Palahniuk’s texts is “a vehicle to get us to think through what might emerge beyond violence, on the other side of our cultural climate where our existence is more a simulacrum of experience. In this world, pain becomes a way into the experience of authentic pleasures.”<sup>261</sup> Self-mutilation and pain, then, are the cures for surviving a culture in which gender and identity have become limiting and debilitating for individuality, self-growth and connectivity.

The actions of self-mutilation, and its significance is that Shane did *not* want to become a woman, it was “the biggest mistake [he] could think to make.”<sup>262</sup>

It’s not that I really want to be a woman...It’s stupid and destructive, and anybody you ask will tell you I’m wrong...Because we’re so trained to do life the right way. To

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<sup>256</sup> Ng, “Destruction and Discourse of Deformity,” 26 & 30.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>259</sup> Lucy Huskinson, “Self as Violent Other: The Problem of Defining the Self,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 47 (2002): 437-458, 438.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Slade, “On Mutilation: The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk’s Fiction,” 66.

<sup>262</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 258.

not make mistakes...I figure, the bigger the mistake looks, the better chance I'll have to break out and live a real life.<sup>263</sup>

By making the biggest mistake of his/her life, Shane is able to step out of the existential “trap” enforced by society and reconnect with her/his sister, Shannon. It is also a further mockery of the beauty ideal and narcissism that dominates this post-modern society; not only is the “beauty ideal” a transsexual, but a transsexual who does not want to become what he is transformed to be. In a sense, Palahniuk is clearing the path for beauty to mean “something different,” something “unknown,” “undefined” and “indefinable.”<sup>264</sup> The same can be said for Palahniuk’s view on gender, as James Dolph notes that Palahniuk “regards gender not as an issue exclusively tied to sex organs, but to the psyche,” as becomes clear through the character of Brandy.<sup>265</sup> This notion is also reflected in the image of a beautiful princess dominating the novel’s cover; however, turning the book upside-down will reveal that the princess is an old “hag.” Gender, then, is a matter of self-perception, how you see yourself and not how society sees you. Shannon comes to this conclusion after it is revealed that Evie is also a transsexual, to which she exclaims: “Give me anything in this whole fucking world that is exactly what it looks like!”<sup>266</sup> But one of Palahniuk’s character’s many characteristics is that they are never as they seem, and nothing is given. Not only do Brandy and Evie transform, Manus’ gender is also transformed throughout the story by being set on an involuntary transgender hormone therapy, which turns him more and more feminine as the road-trip continues. This shows how the relationship between sex and gender does not always correlate, and how society dictates what is understood as sex, as Judith Butler argues:

Sex is made understandable through the signs that indicate how it should be read and understood. These bodily indicators are the cultural means by which the sexed body is read. They are themselves bodily, and they operate as signs, so there is no way to distinguish between what is “materially” true, and what is “culturally” true about a sexed body.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 258.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>265</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades,” 71.

<sup>266</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 269.

<sup>267</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 87.

This indistinctness is what Brandy is out to create because her/his philosophy of spiritual and personal growth and reconnecting goes beyond labels and categories created by society, echoing perfectly his sister's thoughts on the subject matter.

It is interesting to note the resemblance between Shane and Shannon, which echoes the doppelgänger-effect of Marla and the narrator in *Fight Club*. Palahniuk is also here playing with the idea of a split personality, and two different genders uniting. Besides having matching names, Shannon notes that they are “almost the same height,” “born one year apart,” have the “same coloring,” “same features” and “same hair.”<sup>268</sup> Both of them shared the same childhood, and suffered by being neglected which resulted in narcissism later in their lives. Though, while Shannon obtained some attention for her beauty, Shane did not, spurring his thirst for change earlier on than Shannon. However, both want to be loved and accepted, and both love Shannon: “I know what it is I love about her. Brandy Alexander looks exactly the way I looked before the accident. What I love is myself.”<sup>269</sup> Brandy loves Shannon because she is her/his sister and dared to become a monster, while Shannon loves Brandy because she loves herself and is “incapable of loving anybody,”<sup>270</sup> even her own sister/brother. So who is the real monster of this story?

## **Monsterly Love:**

### **The Gothic, Invisible Monsters and Normativity**

The significance of “monster” in this novel is quite apparent, obviously from the title of the book but also from the frequent mentioning of the word. But who are the real monsters of this story, and what does the figure of the monster entail? Monsters have been commonly used in the Gothic novel as a means to “challenge limits”<sup>271</sup> and, as Palahniuk has said himself, to represent a taboo which society, as a whole, cannot openly talk about.<sup>272</sup> The role of monsters was also discussed in regards to *Fight Club* in which Marla is seen as a monster because she challenges traditional concepts of a dichotomous gender category by embodying both male and female traits, in other words she is a “hybrid” character. In *Invisible Monsters* however,

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<sup>268</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 197-198.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>271</sup> Kuhn, “I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound,” 36.

<sup>272</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, “Postcards from the Future, Chuck Palahniuk Q & A - The Death of "Transgressive" Fiction,” uploaded by andrewjrosa on Apr 23, 2007, accessed September 3, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0cLeXPIa8o>.

the symbol of “the monster” has been given different roles, and as the title indicates, there are “more than one monster.”<sup>273</sup>

Shannon shares her story from her trip to the grocery store “... a boy, I write, a little boy in the supermarket called me monster.”<sup>274</sup> Shannon is literally described as a monster, and deemed so by society because her exterior does not conform to what is “acceptable” for a female to look like. To society, she really is a monster without a face:

The way my face is without a jaw, my throat just ends in sort of a hole with my tongue hanging out. Around the hole, the skin is all scar tissue: dark red lumps and shiny the way you’d look if you got the cherry pie in a pie eating contest...and hanging down around the roof is the white vertebrae horseshoe of the upper teeth I have left.<sup>275</sup>

However, being a monster does not necessarily mean something negative. Punter and Byron point out that: “Monsters, as the displaced embodiments of tendencies that are repressed or, in Julia Kristeva’s sense of the term, ‘abjected’ within a specific culture not only establish the boundaries of the human, but may also challenge them.”<sup>276</sup> Shannon is challenging post-modern society’s conception of beauty by displaying the complete opposite. They continue by stating that in Gothic texts, which *Invisible Monsters* can be considered to be, attention is repeatedly drawn to

...the monster’s constructed nature, to the mechanisms of monster production, and reveal precisely how the other is constructed and positioned as both alien and inferior. In turn, this denaturalizes the human, showing the supposedly superior human to be, like the monster’s otherness, simply the product of an ongoing struggle in the discursive construction and reconstruction of power.<sup>277</sup>

By displaying a mutilated face, completely outside of what is traditional, Shannon is addressing and exposing post-modern society’s “illness,” as Eduardo Mendieta would say, of an external locus of identity and gender based on looks alone, and the power of this struggle. However, as previously stated by Kuhn, being a monster does not always lead to something negative. It may seem that lacking a face has rendered her completely invisible, as nobody will look at her and instead are busy “reading the labels of French’s Mustard,” or “reading

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<sup>273</sup> Ng, “Destruction and Discourse of Deformity,” 33.

<sup>274</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 60.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>276</sup> David Punter and Dennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 264.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

tabloid newspapers as if there's hidden gold there."<sup>278</sup> However, as a person without a set identity, Shannon is free to be whomever she wants to be, giving her the ability to see things because of her "invisibility" and to also go beyond the body: "When nobody will look at you, you can stare a hole in them...this is your revenge."<sup>279</sup> Like Shane, she has gone beyond labels and is no longer trapped in the vicious circle of playing "the looking good game," acquiring freedom and also obtaining a sense of power: "I'm an invisible nobody...I'm already dead...It felt like I could do anything."<sup>280</sup> Palahniuk uses the symbol of the monster in order to demonstrate that it takes difference to create progress and authenticity, as Shannon points out towards the end of the book: "At last I'll be growing again, mutating, adapting, evolving...The truth is, being ugly isn't the thrill you'd think, but it can be an opportunity for something better than I ever imagined."<sup>281</sup>

Society also emerges as a monster, or being responsible for creating monsters, as is shown through Evie and also Shannon's "overdetermined bodies in fetishistic service of hyperreality...being always in horrible excess of who or what they are."<sup>282</sup> It is society's continual construction of identical identities, creating a hunger for attention and narcissism, for creating likeness instead of difference, which in turn takes away authenticity and the ability to love and connect to other people. For example, Shannon's narcissism turned monstrous when she rejected her brother Shane's entrance when he was kicked out of the house: "He said, 'Hey let me in.'...I turned on the bedroom light so I could only see myself in the window,"<sup>283</sup> and it also shows the disconnect between the two. Thus, it is the categories that are weighing these characters down that are monstrous, and the only means of escaping these monstrous categories is through self-mutilation, by becoming a "monster" on society's terms but really showing the monstrous traits of society.<sup>284</sup>

Brandy, as Ng points out, "reveals the 'monstrous' nature of gender and beauty insofar as they have become determined and manipulated by the culture industry," by performing drag, and being the "monster mound" in which dissolves this mediated form.<sup>285</sup> Throughout the book, Shannon proclaims her monstrosity all through the story, but in fact both brother

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<sup>278</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 54 & 55.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 154 & 143.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 287-288.

<sup>282</sup> Ng, "Destruction and Discourse of Deformity," 32.

<sup>283</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 150

<sup>284</sup> Slade, "On Mutilation," 71.

<sup>285</sup> Ng, "Destruction and Discourse of Deformity," 32.

and sister are monsters, although in different ways. Shannon is a monster in the sense that she rejects beauty, and by extension rejects to be visible: “If I can’t be beautiful, I want to be invisible.”<sup>286</sup> Only by resisting the monstrous quality of culture can she regain a “self,” even though that means making herself invisible. However, as Ng argues, it is Brandy, and her excessive beauty, who is revealed to be the invisible monster. As he points out: “Beauty is acknowledged for its ‘masking’ quality to disguise moral or emotional deformities. Brandy’s monstrous beauty – her ‘becoming-woman’ ... is both declaration and camouflaging her ‘confrontation with pain of transition and transformation’ and the ‘exhilaration’ of such experiences themselves.”<sup>287</sup> It is only through painful transformation, violence, by becoming the monster in excess and presenting a societal taboo, can one reclaim an identity. Only by eliminating the limited boundaries of their gender can the characters regain their individuality and connection to others. By using the monster as a symbol, Palahniuk is going via the Gothic genre which “...warns us the dangers of repressing energies, natural, social, psychic, textual, or sexual.”<sup>288</sup>

Becoming monsters, Ng continues, enables a form of escape, and a transcendence that suggests the sublime by presenting the unrepresentable.<sup>289</sup> Andrew Slade argues that Palahniuk’s works use the sublime through the means of mutilated bodies, monstrous behavior, pain and terror, in order to seek redemption, solace and authentic existence.<sup>290</sup> Edmund Burke explains the sublime as

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger...whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; ...it is productive of the strongest feeling which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>291</sup>

The sublime, then, is something associated with pain and terror, much like the Gothic genre’s monster. Pain, terror and danger are themes that keep repeating through Palahniuk’s narratives, and the terror of pain and danger, the sublime, is particularly pertinent in *Invisible*

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<sup>286</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 214.

<sup>287</sup> Ng, “Destruction and Discourse of Deformity,” 33.

<sup>288</sup> Maggie Kilgour, “Dr. Frankenstein meets Dr. Freud,” *American Gothic: New Interventions In a National Narrative*, ed. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1986), 40.

<sup>289</sup> Ng, Notes to “Destruction and Discourse of Deformity,” 34.

<sup>290</sup> Slade, “On Mutilation,” 62-63.

<sup>291</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 36.

*Monster*'s monsters. The feeling of pain and danger comes from challenging conformity and eliciting the feeling that "something will happen,"<sup>292</sup> they are occurrences which portray themselves as "minimal ruptures in the generic conventions."<sup>293</sup> Slade argues, then, that "the body is the site that the sublime will happen." "The mutilated bodies that appear in this writing are the means through which he approaches the unrepresentable in narrative."<sup>294</sup> It is also the mutilated bodies that bridge the gaps between people, as Slade points out that the novel "reconciles and redeems suffering through the tropological power of love." A monstrous love indeed, born out of mutilation and terror, seems to be the only way to love in this representation of post-modern society, a mutilation that reconciles sister and brother.<sup>295</sup>

Love, then, is a means of escaping entrapment and violence in Palahniuk's narratives, as Jesse Kavaldo observes, "his book's solution is laughter and romance."<sup>296</sup> As in *Fight Club*, love in a society based purely on surface has been rendered mute or non-existent, and also has monstrous qualities, as Shannon observes: "I'm an invisible monster, and I am incapable of loving anybody."<sup>297</sup> As Andy Johnson points out: "...ego is the locus of narcissism or selfishness that prevents [the people] from connecting to each other and the world at large,"<sup>298</sup> as beauty becomes more important than connection, as Evie observes: "Evie says that beautiful people should never date each other... Together, as a couple, you're less than the sum of your parts."<sup>299</sup> This disconnect between people shows itself in the relationship between Shannon and Manus; a relationship that was just this "long, long sex thing that could end at any moment."<sup>300</sup> Shannon believes it is a loving relationship because both her and Manus are beautiful, fulfilling her narcissistic needs but in the end realizing that it was just all about "getting off".<sup>301</sup> The point of disconnect between the sexes can also be shown in Manus' notions on self-sucking: "Over breakfast every morning, he'd show me glossy pictures of guys self-sucking...he doesn't need anybody else in the world...Then

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<sup>292</sup> Jean- Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans Geoff Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988), 84.

<sup>293</sup> Slade, "On Mutilation," 64.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>296</sup> Jesse Kavaldo, "The Fiction of Self-Destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralizer," in *You Do Not Talk About Fight Club: I am Jack's Completely Unauthorized Essay Collection*, ed. Read Mercer Schuchardt (Benbella: Dallas, 2008), 12.

<sup>297</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 198.

<sup>298</sup> Johnson, "Bullets and Blades," 67.

<sup>299</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 39.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

Manus would tell me, ‘This is what guys want.’<sup>302</sup> Clearly this indicates the independency of the sexes, which was also apparent in *Fight Club*. In *Invisible Monsters*, narcissism has taken over to the point where it renders the connection between man and woman moot, and all acts of love lose their credibility and feeling, like Shane describes being sexually abused by Manus: “It wasn’t horrible...but it wasn’t love.”<sup>303</sup> The notion of things only “looking like love” is prevalent throughout the novel; Manus looking like he loves Shannon, Shannon looking like she loves Manus, Shannon looking like she loves Brandy but really only loving herself, discovering that “the one you love and the one who loves you are never, ever, the same person.”<sup>304</sup>

Subsequently, in a world without love, the only way to establish connection and for love to reemerge is through becoming monsters. Shannon’s failure to connect to other people “comes in part from her uneasy awareness that she is trapped in a world that has reduced her to a commodity: temporarily attractive or useful but ultimately inhuman and disposable.”<sup>305</sup> The only way for Shannon to love, reconnect and essentially be reborn again is to “give up the idea [she] had any control.”<sup>306</sup> The challenge for both of the MacFarlands, as Johnson argues, is to “break through their narcissism to feel a connection to each other and the world at large.”<sup>307</sup> At the end of the novel, it seems that the “makeover” of traveling on the road with her brother and Manus has helped her transcend her narcissism and the hatred for her brother: “Me, I just want Shane to be happy. I’m tired of being me, hateful me.”<sup>308</sup> Shannon no longer needs the “adulation of an audience to find self-worth,”<sup>309</sup> as she takes off her veils to become the whole truth and nothing but the truth. She has overcome narcissism by embracing her differentness and commits the ultimate act of love, proving that she can love, by giving Shane her identity and her beautiful life:

This is all my information, my birth certificate, my everything. You can be Shannon McFarland from now on. My career. My ninety-degree attention. It’s yours. Because

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<sup>302</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 69.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>305</sup> Truffin, “This is what passes for free will: Chuck Palahniuk’s Postmodern Gothic,” 79.

<sup>306</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 286.

<sup>307</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades,” 71.

<sup>308</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 293.

<sup>309</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades,” 71.



I'm tired of hating and preening and telling myself old stories that were never true in the first place.<sup>310</sup>

The ending in which Shannon gives her identity and her life to Shane is a conflicted one. While the ending ends on a sentimental note with Shannon declaring her “completely and totally,” “permanently” and hopeless love for Brandy Alexander, Andrew Slade detects an ambiguous gesture in the handing over of her life. He argues: “...given that she took such drastic and painful measures to escape that identity and career herself...handing over her identification...is...simultaneously a gesture of love and an act of profound cruelty.”<sup>311</sup> By giving Shane her old life, she is entrapping him in the vicious circle that the homogenous beauty ideal and the following constricting gender categories are making for him by demanding constant re-improvements. Scott Ash also seems to find more negatives than positives in the outcome of this narrative, which suggests that both Slade and Ash have not paid attention to the essence of the story: to challenge conformity by making mistakes. Shannon advises Shane to get a contract with a modeling agency, urging him to “Be famous...I’m giving you my life because I want the whole world to know you. I wish the whole world would embrace what it hates.”<sup>312</sup> By giving Shane her identity, Johnson argues that “Shannon gives him the adventure he craves while luring her former audience unknowingly accepting the ambiguity so feared by traditional American society.”<sup>313</sup> By transferring her identity, Shane can continue to challenge traditional concepts of beauty and gender as a beauty icon which will “allow [him] to challenge American society’s assumptions and fears, thereby forcing Middle America to think beyond binary oppositions and its limited language of experience.”<sup>314</sup>

Although the novel leaves the reader with an open and somewhat ambiguous ending, the arguments for a positive effect is clear for Shannon, Shane and society. However, as I have mentioned previously in regards to the *Fight Club* chapter, Palahniuk’s endings tend to yield towards bittersweet, as it is never really “happily ever after.” Johnson notes that this novel displays an open ending in which “we know some disaster eventually will destroy the tenuous happy ending.”<sup>315</sup> Yet as a life-lesson, Shannon leaves us with the idea that

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<sup>310</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 295.

<sup>311</sup> Slade, “On Mutilation,” 83.

<sup>312</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 294.

<sup>313</sup> Johnson, “Bullets and Blades,” 71.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

“Wherever we end up, I just won’t go back to normal.”<sup>316</sup> Palahniuk does not offer a concise “cure” for the “illness” of post-modern America, however as Sherry Truffin argues, he puts forth the notion that the monster and its monstrosities should not be defeated, or worse, cured, but rather be embraced.<sup>317</sup>

The concept of normal and “normativity” has been severely challenged throughout this entire novel. Through self-distortion and self-mutilation, the characters have found salvation and freedom from the categories that bound them. While the character of Shannon challenged conceptions of identity formation in a post-modern world, Brandy/Shane challenged the “normativity” surrounding gender, while also giving herself/himself a sense of identity in a world where everyone is looking for “a copy of a copy of a copy,” lost in “staring at themselves in a monitor, staring at themselves in monitor.” Through the act of self-mutilation, the characters managed to escape their categories, thus ensuing spiritual freedom and simultaneously depicting the containment of such categories, arguing for a society that promotes individual freedom, and is free from a mass-definition of identity. However, Palahniuk’s gender-quest does not stop there, as the binary categories are once again under attack in his more recent Gothic novel *Diary*.

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<sup>316</sup> Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 160.

<sup>317</sup> Truffin, “This is what passes for free will,” 85.

## Chapter 3: Diary

If you're reading this, welcome back to reality. This is where all that glorious, unlimited potential of your youth has led. All that unfulfilled promise. Here's what you've done with your life... Now smile – if you still can.<sup>318</sup>

Misty Marie Wilmot has not smiled since becoming a resident on the Waytansa Island. How can she, stuck in a job as a waitress and taking care of her daughter Tabbi while her husband is in a coma? Written in 2003, the novel *Diary* is the last story I will be analyzing in this thesis, however, it is not the last in Palahniuk's body of works. As of 2013 he has written 13 works of fiction, with his last one being *Invisible Monsters (Remix)*, and is currently writing a sequel to his 2011 novel *Damned* called *Doomed*. The reasons for choosing *Diary* are slightly different than the other two books and it stands in many ways on the opposite side of the spectrum than *Fight Club*. When analyzing the story in a gendered perspective, it does not focus on gender bending like *Invisible Monsters* or characters challenging gender dichotomies by means of addressing masculinity and femininity like *Fight Club*; what we get is a grim depiction of traditional gender roles set in repeat, resulting in a society that is doomed to fail.

Christina Angel argues that Palahniuk's novels "do not simply reflect what we wish to see, but open doors to what we wish *not* to see but perhaps need to."<sup>319</sup> In *Diary*, Palahniuk does not so much focus on showing disconnectedness by disassembling and contorting gender; instead the focus seems to be on a gendered situation that is inevitable and impossible to escape. While the characters in both *Invisible Monsters* and *Fight Club* feel trapped by a society in which the gendered boundaries limit the characters' mobility, spiritually and physically, they eventually are able to break free and reunite from those said boundaries. *Diary*, however, is different. The story is the exposition of a gendered "sickness," using Eduardo Mendieta's phrasing, that is plaguing American contemporary society, in which the "sickness" is a never-ending cycle of repeated gendered behavior, meaning the society upholds traditional gender roles such as the practice of separate spheres and marriage as a business arrangement rather than a commitment of love. Although the limited behavior of the sexes – men are supposed to marry a girl, women are supposed to knit and learn china-

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<sup>318</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Diary* (New York: Anchor Books, A Division of Random House Inc, 2003), 4-5.

<sup>319</sup> Angel, "This Theatre of Mass Destruction: Medieval Morality and Jacobean Tragedy in Palahniuk's novels," 60.

patterns – are prevalent and debilitating for the main character, Misty is unable to escape from them, as opposed to the other narrators who find redemption and a new life through creating a new identity. As the book evolves, the reader comes to find out that Misty lives a life she has lived hundreds of times before, a life from which there is no escape.

As I have previously mentioned in the other chapters, Palahniuk likes to use elements from the Gothic and Horror genres and incorporate them into his stories to create characters that shock and scare. In this story, the elements borrowed are many, and Heidi Ashbaugh argues that *Diary* is a good example of “contemporary American horror.”<sup>320</sup> She explains:

...as we get older...what scares us usually changes to some degree. While we may still get a scare from vampires and werewolves, we realize that there are things that *can* happen to us – indeed *do* happen to people around us on a daily basis – that are much more frightening.<sup>321</sup>

While there are no vampires or werewolves in *Diary*, the story creates a sense of horror and dread by depicting the situation that surrounds Misty: her husband’s suicide attempt, the death of a child, and the feeling of losing both mind and body to a power outside of her own control. David Skal comments that the American nightmare “is about disenfranchisement, exclusion, downward mobility, a struggle-to-death world of winners and losers.”<sup>322</sup> The story of *Diary*, then, has a more sociological focus than the other two books. While the sole focus of *Fight Club* was the precarious situation for men and masculinity, this story focuses on the social situation for women, as if time has reversed itself to before the women’s suffrage movement in the late nineteenth century with the depiction of the woman as suppressed in society, a life that has been led for 300 years and through three women: Maura Kincaid, Constance Burton, and now, Misty Kleinman. The sole focus revolving around the slow destruction of Misty Marie Kleinman is perhaps Palahniuk’s attempt at making a harsher judgment on American society and its rigidity when it comes to gender and identity; that it continues to create its own stereotypes and finds itself in a societal decline instead of advancement, with the message on the wall saying: “We were here. We are here. We will

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<sup>320</sup> Heidi Ashbaugh, “Chuck Palahniuk’s *Diary*: American Horror, Gothic, And Beyond,” in *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, ed. Jeffrey A. Sartain (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 124.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> David Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 354.

always be here. And we've failed again."<sup>323</sup> The trap, then, is society's failure to realize its own mistakes, thus leaving the mistakes to be repeated, again and again.

In this chapter I will argue that Palahniuk is presenting gender as something governed by society, leading to the death of individuality on behalf of society. I will focus on how the female characters are portrayed in the story and what grim picture Palahniuk is painting of the gender-battle. Looking specifically at Misty and Pete's marriage, I will also argue that Palahniuk's take on love and the modern-day marriage depicts a gendered situation that creates a disconnection between the sexes and prohibits them from expressing love. Because the power of controlling society lies with society and not with the individual, and because society is dependent on the same repetitive actions for survival, individuality and progression are stunted. I will claim that Palahniuk argues against the fossilization of gendered roles in society, and shows that, through the use of the horror and gothic genre, if it continues we will always fail. Lastly, I will look at and comment on Palahniuk's use of genre and style: what does he accomplish by writing in the Horror and Gothic genre, and what does that say about gender? A key point in regards to this section is his deployment of the diary form in regards to portraying gender conflict. The form of the diary or journal has had a long tradition in American and British literature since the nineteenth century. The genre was also mostly dominated by female authors, which makes Palahniuk's utilization of it interesting. What does it mean for Palahniuk, as a male, to write in this genre? What is he accomplishing and saying about gender by doing this? Perhaps it is the hope of "saving" American society as Nora Adams (Misty Wilmot) wishes in her closing letter to the author: "My hope is this story will be read for thousands of generations, and it will stay in people's minds. To be read by the next generation, and the next...My hope is this story will change the way she lives her life. I hope this story will save her – that little girl – whatever her name will be next time."<sup>324</sup>

## **If Your Name Is Misty, Take a Drink:**

### **The Waytansea Island and its Women**

Like with the two previous books, this story takes place in a post-modern American middle class society, meaning Palahniuk is making yet another snide comment about middle-class lifestyles and attitudes. The targeted group in *Diary* is the upper-middle/upper-class, and more specifically a group situated on an island, amusingly called Waytansea to foreshadow

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<sup>323</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 254.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

unpredictable events. Although the group seems limited, the comment on the larger part of American society is visible, as Ashbough argues: “While they occupy the margins, they sometimes hit close to home – to the ordinary and everyday normalcy of the uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of life.”<sup>325</sup> While humans in both *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* are reduced to products or goods, the inhabitants the reader is presented with on Waytansea Island are different in that they do not take an active part in society. They are the backbone of America, the rich and “fine old island families going back to the Mayflower.”<sup>326</sup> In the same way as the characters presented in *Fight Club* are “a copy of a copy,” and in *Invisible Monsters* they are “the combined product of everyone [you] know,” the island inhabitants seem the same way: “Those fine old family trees where everybody was everybody’s cousin once removed...all the sons seemed to wear the same shabby old jewelry...Even all their golden retrievers were inbred cousins to each other.”<sup>327</sup> Like the homogenous beauty ideal forces people into becoming copies of each other in *Invisible Monsters*, the families of Waytansea Island are also plagued by the simulacra-effect, but not because of beauty-ideals, but because of a long-standing tradition of repeated societal rituals in order for the island people to maintain their wealth and get rid of the overcrowding masses of tourists. The story, then, comes to describe and ultimately reflects the hyper-gentrification of American cities and communities. This is why Eduardo Mendieta has labeled this novel as perhaps Palahniuk’s darkest, simply because it “may be his most realistic [novel]:” “Under the subterfuge of the quest for the holy grail of inspiration and genius, *Diary* is about what a class, a group of people empowered by their wealth will do to retain and mark their status as unassailable.”<sup>328</sup> Through this class-society and their gentrification of gender, shaped in the form of a human sacrifice ritual, they stand as a symbol of a society that maintains a firm chokehold on the individual.

So we meet Misty Marie Wilmot, the “heroine” of the story: “Forty-one fucking years old...No college degree. No real work experience. Your poor wife. She works the same kind of shitty restaurant job her mom did.”<sup>329</sup> Like the other main characters I have analyzed in this thesis, Misty is entrapped in a life she hates, working as a waitress to support her daughter while her husband is in a coma, constantly reminding herself to “take a drink” in order to

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<sup>325</sup> Ashbough, “Chuck Palahniuk’s *Diary*,” 143.

<sup>326</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 46.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Mendieta, “Surviving Chuck Palahniuk,” 407.

<sup>329</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 30-33.

cope with her life. While the Narrator is his job in *Fight Club*, and Shannon is her face in *Invisible Monsters*, Misty is a nobody – just a “poor white trash kid” with dreams of once settling down on this island she keeps envisioning.<sup>330</sup> The Waytansea Island is something Misty has been drawing pictures of since she was a little girl living in a trailer park, as a means of escaping her working-class status and the fate of ending up like her own mother – a single-mom stuck working two jobs. Escaping the “trap” is something that becomes thematic for Palahniuk’s characters, and like Shannon wants to escape beauty and the hyper-reality of the modeling lifestyle, Misty wants to escape her social class, and succeeds, moving slowly into the “real” world she has envisioned in all her paintings: “And the more she could imagine the island, the less she liked the real world. The more she could imagine the people, the less she liked any real people. Nothing was as *real* as her imagined world.”<sup>331</sup> While she does succeed in escaping the working-class, her “escape” actually becomes the distorted, inauthentic nightmare of a world in which Shannon found herself to be in, actually pushing Misty further into society’s “trap.”

This is, as Palahniuk comments in an interview, typical of his characters: “...they are always victims of themselves,” and also “isolated in a way that society says should make us happy.”<sup>332</sup> Misty Marie, then, creates her own trap by walking straight into it, by following what society dictates will make her happy, shunning individuality and growth: “And poor Misty Kleinman, she told herself, it wasn’t a career as an artist she wanted. What she really wanted, all along, was the house, the family, the peace.”<sup>333</sup> In a society where success is measured by the things you own and the people you are with, the things you own start to own you. Palahniuk makes a comment about the post-modern picture of ‘success’ by elaborating on the American Dream; the dream is not becoming as rich as possible, “...the dream is the big house, off alone somewhere. A penthouse...or a mountain castle top something...Some lovely isolated nest...An environment you can control, free from conflict and pain,”<sup>334</sup> echoing Misty’s own mom who believed “the American dream is to be so rich you can escape from everyone.”<sup>335</sup> Misty’s dream is exactly this, albeit slightly more traditional and interesting when viewed in a gendered perspective. According to society’s measures of

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<sup>330</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 8.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>332</sup> Kavanagh, “Of Failed Romance, Writer’s Malpractice, and Prose for the Nose: A Conversation with Chuck Palahniuk,” 184.

<sup>333</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 13.

<sup>334</sup> Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*, xv.

<sup>335</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 152.

success, she has got it all: the husband, big wedding and “A big stone house on Birch Street” – a “perfect island paradise.”<sup>336</sup>

However, Misty has become the “queen of the slaves,”<sup>337</sup> working as a chambermaid, disconnected from her comatose husband and her daughter Tabbi. What always motivates Palahniuk’s characters to invoke change is loneliness and disconnection from other people. Keeping in mind his own description of his characters: “...all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect to other people,” Palahniuk suggests that isolation is the side-effect of society’s demand of what it means to have “succeeded,” the aftermath of realizing the American dream: “Whether it’s a ranch in Montana or basement apartment with ten thousand DVDs and high-speed internet, it never fails. We get there, and we’re alone. And we’re lonely.”<sup>338</sup>

Misty sacrifices her artistic ambitions in order to marry Peter Wilmot, a member of one of the richest and oldest families on Waytansea Island. Heidi Ashbaugh observes that Misty’s dreams are “traditionally feminine and domestic,”<sup>339</sup> dreaming of a society where women “keep house,” and “embroider handkerchiefs. Arrange Flowers.”<sup>340</sup> Again, we see the “over-feminization” that we saw with Brandy Alexander in *Invisible Monsters*, though here it represents an exaggeration of the feminization of thoughts and roles, rather than the feminization of the physical body. Instead of evolving the gender equal society Misty originally comes from, with her mother being sole provider of the family and an absent father, she reverts back to old, traditional views of gender, thus invoking the notion of inauthenticity and inauthentic behavior that echoes through both *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*. Like the narrator’s insomnia brought on by the mechanized everyday schedule in *Fight Club*, Misty is also in her own “personal coma,” battling the growing tourism during the summer which litters the island with advertisement: “The view outside, the horizon is cluttered with billboards, the same brand name, for fast food, sunglasses, tennis shoes...floating in every wave, you see cigarette butts.”<sup>341</sup> The island has become cluttered and dirty by the growing consumer demands, turning the residents on the island into slaves, Misty being the “queen” of them all. Also worth noting is the fact that Misty suppresses her artistic urges and abilities,

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<sup>336</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 13.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>338</sup> Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*, xv.

<sup>339</sup> Ashbaugh, “Chuck Palahniuk’s *Diary*,” 141.

<sup>340</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 9.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



which further leads her into her comatose state and creates a spiritual blockage. Maggie Kilgour argues that the Gothic “warns us of the dangers of repressing energies, natural, social, psychic, textual, or sexual”, and at the same time offers a means of expressing these urges.<sup>342</sup> The story of Misty in *Diary* offers a good example of suppressed urges, in several ways, and what monsters and monstrous acts that creates. I will return to this in the discussion of horror and the Gothic later in this chapter.

While it is clear that the traditional gender roles prevail through the character of Misty, some interesting notions can also be made in regards to the other women appearing in the story, that of Misty’s mother-in-law, Grace, and Misty’s daughter, Tabbi. Misty describes them all to Peter in her diary: “This is what you think you know best. These are the three layers of your skin. The epidermis, the dermis, and the fat. Your wife, your daughter, and your mother.”<sup>343</sup> The description here is interesting in regards to their comparison to the layers of skin. First of all, the sentence “This is what you think you know the best,” seems to signal the confusion and mystical quality Palahniuk seems to put in his characters: they are not as they seem, and in some way they always challenge the notion that is first created of them: the narrator is actually Tyler Durden, Brandy Alexander is actually Shane, and Misty is living a life she has lived before, much thanks to her mother-in-law’s doing. Grace stands as the matriarchal figure of the story, the instigator for keeping the legend of human sacrifice alive. By labeling her as the “fat” that lies under the skin, a little wink to *Fight Club* and the making of soap, Palahniuk is giving her numerous traits: superfluous, damaging (too much fat will kill you), and “under the skin,” meaning “to effect someone very strongly in a way that is difficult to forget.”<sup>344</sup>

Misty is compared to the epidermis, which is the outermost skin layer. I will comment further on the symbolism of this in regards to Misty’s marriage with Peter, but for now it can be said that the outer layer of the skin is what is easiest to destroy. This ties symbolically in with Misty’s body being sacrificed by the island, a ritual that keeps repeating itself every 100 years. The use of split personalities is also used in this story, as well as in the other two books, and offers an interesting view on gender roles in repeat. Misty has previously been two

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<sup>342</sup> Maggie Kilgour, “Dr. Frankenstein meets Dr. Freud,” *American Gothic: New Interventions In a National Narrative*, ed. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1986), 40.

<sup>343</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 5.

<sup>344</sup> Kelly W.A., “Idioms,” *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2nd ed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), accessed February 13, 2013, <http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/get+under+skin>.

other women – Maura Kincaid and Constance Burton. The difference here between this split personality and the occurrences in *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* is that these are lives that keep repeating themselves; the same woman reliving the story of sacrifice for the society’s survival is stuck in an endless loop. While the narrator created Tyler in order to escape de-masculinization and disconnect, and Shane became Shannon’s escape from labels, Misty is the potential escape from a gendered society that has halted. She is both her gender’s spark of hope for a future without suppression, while at the same time being the “savior” of a society that, in turn, only maintains the oppressive society in which she is made a victim of and a slave to. While the outcome of the other characters had the glimpse of progress and reconnection through the shunning of gender roles and gender dichotomies, Misty never escapes her fate, showing how “a culture unaware of the past will make the same mistakes again and again.”<sup>345</sup> Here, Palahniuk points a finger at US’s self-harming culture; one that perpetuates their own stereotypes and is incapable of the development needed in order to restore connection between human beings.

The dermis connects the outer layer of skin and the fat, and represents Tabbi. Unlike the outer layer, it is protected and held unchangeable, yet with the potential of becoming new and glowing skin. While Misty should have been the main protector of Tabbi, Grace has instead taken over sole responsibility for her, teaching her to recognize china-patterns instead of preparing her for the “real” world of working. While the epidermis and dermis, mother and daughter, should be connected, there is disconnection that Misty wants to restore. However, Tabbi is being “domesticated” by her grandmother, learning to recognize china-patterns, and is informed of the island’s plan of sacrificing Misty for “the greater good” and is actually the main perpetrator for playing out the plan of Misty’s destruction, and eventually the killing of all the summer people: “I set fire to their clothes. Granmy and Granby Wilmot taught me how...I saved us. I saved the future of the whole island...If you tell, then I tell.”<sup>346</sup> By passing the tradition on to Tabitha, and using her to hinder her mother from telling, she will be keeping the tradition alive, always managing to revert the culture back to its original, traditional state, stunting all progress.

What seems to separate this novel from the other two, then, is the focus on the struggle of power between the individual and society, and who controls identity. Scott Ash

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<sup>345</sup> Kavanagh, “Of Failed Romance, Writer’s Malpractice, and Prose for the Nose: A Conversation with Chuck Palahniuk,” 182.

<sup>346</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 257.

argues that the “individual must fight to define herself against the backdrop of a disciplinary system that is more interested in perpetuating its own existence and power.”<sup>347</sup> For society to succeed and to implement their plan, Misty must be reduced to a blindfolded, docile and paralyzed tool, but to secure her own survival, the hotel and its residents must succumb to a fire. Misty plays the suppressed female, something society has built itself around in order to survive. Critics who have deemed *Fight Club* as having misogynistic themes, would have had better luck calling *Diary* misogynistic; not only is Misty reduced to a passive woman incapable of movement and sight, a mere tool in the grand scheme of things, it is also discovered that she is not even a unique person but a reincarnation of previous selves:” Two hundred years ago, Misty was Maura Kincaid. A hundred years ago she was Constance Burton.”<sup>348</sup> Christina Angel argues, “Constantly living someone else’s life...is the ultimate negation of the self because it almost certainly results in the lack of free will.”<sup>349</sup> Misty is disconnected from herself because she is always just a copy of her previous selves, removing her from authenticity, like we see in both *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*.

The notion of everything being cyclical and predetermined suggests a worldview that is not tied to a contemporary, religiously-based ideation of the world: rather, it reflects a “wheel of Fortune” notion that everything circles in a pattern, and people are random victims of Fortune’s wheel rather than of their own actions.<sup>350</sup> Like the people inside Plato’s cave, “...we live chained inside a dark cave. We’re chained so all we can see is the back wall of the cave. All we can see are the shadows that move there,”<sup>351</sup> Misty’s life is only pale shadows on a wall in which she barely sees but to which she must abide by: “Art school doesn’t teach you how to escape your soul being recycled.”<sup>352</sup> This is the main difference between the main characters of the three books I have analyzed: Misty is the only character that does not manage to escape and to reconnect. She is the sad example of the true victim of a society that has fossilized, thus creating a power dynamic that imprisons individuals in their selves, their genders and in loneliness. However, power is also given to the other female characters, that of Grace and Tabbi. Acting as the instigators of the “cleansing” ritual, they have the power of

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<sup>347</sup> Scott Ash, “Going to the Body: The Tension of Freedom/Restraint in Palahniuk’s novels,” in *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, ed. Jeffrey A. Sartain (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 84.

<sup>348</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 243.

<sup>349</sup> Angel, “This theatre of Mass Destruction,” 58.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 252.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 244.

destruction. In many ways, Grace is a reminder of Tyler Durden, believing that death and destruction can create something that will last: “Grace says, ‘We all die.’ She says, ‘The goal isn’t to live forever, the goal is to create something that will.’”<sup>353</sup>

### **“Can You Feel This?”**

#### **Going to the Body: Peter, Marriage and Pain**

While Palahniuk’s main characters have a tendency to walk around in their own “personal comas,” Peter is actually in a coma for most of the book, excluding some retrospective passages, ultimately signifying a passive male part. Although he is passive throughout the story, Peter took an active part, although reluctantly so, in fulfilling the island legend by marrying Misty: “...every four generations, a boy from the island would meet a woman he’d marry. A young art student. Like an old fairy tale. ... the day one unlucky boy married this woman, the rest of the generation would be free to live their own lives. Recycling the same ancient success.”<sup>354</sup> The holy bond of marriage and the “old fairy tale,” is reversed in this story, signaling instead disconnect between the genders. It seems that Palahniuk is critiquing the old traditions of marriage as the only way in which men and women can unite, but which, in turn, creates only detachment between the sexes. Marriage was traditionally seen as “the mundane and necessary alternative to the enchantment of feudal romance. Although the aristocracy glorified romantic ideals, their marriage decisions were based on rational rather than romantic goals,”<sup>355</sup> similar to the boys on Waytansea Island who are forced into matrimony: “Every boy in his generation had to enroll in art school,” “had to wear a piece of jewelry,” and “had to meet as many women as possible,”<sup>356</sup> in order to save the island and maintain an “economic obligation that affected power, property, and privilege.”<sup>357</sup> The marriage, then, between Misty and Peter is based on tradition, not love, as becomes clear through their dysfunctional behavior and lack of intimacy. It might suggest that Palahniuk is using Peter and Misty’s marriage to mock traditional views of matrimony, a legal bond formed between men and women *only*. Misty was lured into marriage by the use of jewelry,

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<sup>353</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 198.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-207.

<sup>355</sup> Linda L. Lindsey, “Gendered Love, Marriage and Emerging Lifestyles,” *Gender Roles* (Boston: Pearson Education Inc., 2011), 176.

<sup>356</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 207.

<sup>357</sup> Lindsey, *Gender Roles*, 176.

playing perhaps heavily here on the saying “diamonds are a girl’s best friend,” however, the jewelry is “scratched and rusted and tarnished,” indicating the reality of Misty’s married life.

By forcing the young boys at Waytansea Island to marry a woman, the gender boundaries become limited in terms of sexuality and love, thus resulting in the loveless union of Misty and Peter. Like the previous books, love has become an important theme in Palahniuk’s stories as it represents connectivity between people, a connection that has been lost because of the immobility of gender. As in *Fight Club*, this immovability has limited individual expression to such a degree that not even love is recognized anymore, as also Misty comments: “If it was love or inertia. Misty couldn’t tell.”<sup>358</sup> Marriage has always been considered a sign of success, alongside the extravagant house, but through *Diary* and the marriage of Misty and Peter, Palahniuk reveals the less idyllic side to matrimony and deflates the myths surrounding love, much because of this idolization of this “romantic ideal.” Like the desensitized nature of love in *Fight Club*, substituting furniture for physical contact, love in *Diary* is made mechanical and scientific: “Just for the record, one problem with art school is it makes you so much less a romantic. Her whole time dating Peter Wilmot, Misty knew it wasn’t him she loved. Women just look for the best physical specimen to father their children.”<sup>359</sup> She adds, “After you know about biology, you don’t have to be used by it,”<sup>360</sup> failing to notice that she is trapped in a system which upholds the rules of biology. The image of the statues of Apollo and Diana in which Misty and Tabbi stumble upon in the woods, describes what love and marriage has come to in this post-modern world:

The standing man is dark bronze, streaked with lichen and tarnish, a naked man with his feet bolted to a pedestal buried in the bushes beside the trail...Near the man, almost hidden in the fallen leaves, is a dead body...The woman on the ground is broken white marble...the smooth fingers and arms, the elbows without wrinkles.<sup>361</sup>

Apollo, according to Greek mythology, was the god of song, dance, poetry, prophecy and light,<sup>362</sup> while Diana was the goddess of nature, fertility and childbirth.<sup>363</sup> However, instead of

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<sup>358</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 91.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>362</sup> Article "Apollo" created on 03 March 1997, last modified on 31 January 2004, accessed February 30, 2013, <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/apollo.html>.

<sup>363</sup> Article "Diana" created on 03 March 1997, last modified on 24 June 2005, accessed February 30, 2013, <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/d/diana.html>.

standing as symbols of perfection, of a Greek god and goddess, the statues are out in the woods, far away from society, signifying a “distance” to this idealized coupling. The statue of Apollo stands tall, “perfect in proportion,” yet is covered in moss and has lost his bronze glow. This could be interpreted in two ways: either as the outdated, old version of the male ideal, or the defeat of the male in the post-modern world. It is mentioned that Apollo’s feet are “bolted to a pedestal”, meaning he is unable to move or trapped in his spot. This could signify the role of Peter, as he was forced to carry out the island legend and forego his actual desires, cutting off his individual freedom: he represents the static nature of traditional gender roles that the island upholds. Peter is actually compared to a statue on page 192: “Peter is a living example of the golden section, the formula used for ancient Greek sculptors for perfect proportion.”<sup>364</sup> Tabbi also observes that “Apollo’s doesn’t have a dick,”<sup>365</sup> echoing the demasculinization of men we saw in *Fight Club*, reflecting the powerless nature of Peter’s coma, and perhaps also hinting to the lack of sexual connection between him and Misty: “We haven’t had sex in three years.”<sup>366</sup> The woman, on the other hand, is actually lying down besides the man, inferior to him. It can be suggested that Diana represents the “broken” and defeated woman in the post-modern American society, notions carried out by Misty. It is also consequential to note that the statue is described as “dead,” meaning something that has ceased to exist, perhaps symbolizing the death of “woman in progress,” as well as foreshadowing Misty’s fate. There is also mentioned on page 164 that Misty felt “fossilized” like “an ancient mummy,” when her leg got heavily casted after a fall, similar to the stone pedestal that Apollo stands on. It also draws the line to Misty and her comparison to being the outer layer of skin, as I mentioned earlier. The significance of being “dead skin” puts forth the notion of Misty being easily replaced, seeing as dead skin is something the body is getting rid of. It is also worth noting that both Apollo and Diana are statues, implying the notion of fossilized gender roles and gender dichotomy, a static society in which gender is literally “set in stone.”

An interesting detail in regards to Apollo’s life that is worth mentioning, is the fact that he was gay: “Apollo also, as did his father Zeus, fell in love with one of his own gender, Hyacinthus, a Spartan prince.”<sup>367</sup> This draws the line to Peter and the grand uncovering at the

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<sup>364</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 192.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>367</sup> Article “Apollo” created on 03 March 1997; last modified on 31 January 2004, accessed February 30, 2013.

end of the novel which reveals that Peter is also gay and has had a secret relationship with Angel Delaporte: “I’m in love with Angel Delaporte, and I’m sorry but I will not die for our cause.”<sup>368</sup> By making Peter a gay character, Palahniuk again makes the point of finding love in diversity, not in traditional roles perpetuated by society, shown to be such a failure through Misty and Peter’s forced marriage. Though, Palahniuk also heeds a warning to letting the powers of society lie in class rather than in the individual: it is revealed that Peter’s alleged “suicide attempt” was really an “assassination attempt,” implemented by Peter’s father in order to stop him escaping with Angel. Peter, like most of Palahniuk’s main characters, felt the need to “escape the hegemonic control of what society deems are appropriate behaviors and choices.”<sup>369</sup> This point is reflected in Ida Mancini’s character from Palahniuk’s novel *Choke* as she points out that the “...laws that keep us safe, these same laws condemn us to boredom. Without access to true chaos, we’ll never have true peace.”<sup>370</sup> In a way, it is Peter who is the “chuckian” main character, who revolts against the system by challenge the binary categories of sexuality, thus creating chaos, much like Tyler Durden. However, like Misty and even more so, Peter is reduced to a docile conduit, not even capable of feeling pain let alone love, something that acts as a means of authentication of life and spirit in Palahniuk’s works, which suggests that “escaping all systems of discipline to find freedom in some absolute sense, to find an authentic sense of self is likely an unrealistic dream, for we are all controlled and disciplined subjects within a larger discourse.”<sup>371</sup>

As I have mentioned before, much of the conflict of power between the individual and society in Palahniuk’s works lies in and on the body, as Scott Ash points out, “...the body is exactly the site of battle for the individual in postmodern, hyper-capitalistic America.”<sup>372</sup> Firstly the bodies reflect on the social situation the characters find themselves in: Bob in *Fight Club* has developed breasts symbolizing the feminization of men, while the narrator reflects on the fragmentation of the body with his split personality, as well as Shannon realizing she is the “combined product” of everyone she knows. This is also an occurrence in *Diary*, where the social restraints on individuals is reflected in the fragmentation of the human body, as the various biological names of muscles which cause us to frown and smile are described as “just

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<sup>368</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 228.

<sup>369</sup> Ash, “Going to the Body: The tension of Freedom/Restraint in Palahniuk’s Books,” 75.

<sup>370</sup> Palahniuk, *Choke*, 159.

<sup>371</sup> Ash, “Going to the Body: The tension of Freedom/Restraint in Palahniuk’s Books,” 76.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

parts, acting as they are genetically predisposed to do.”<sup>373</sup> However, Palahniuk suggests that the mind should not be blocked by the body, it should transcend it and go beyond its boundaries in order to restore connection to the community. Most often that transcendence comes through self-destruction, invoking the idea that “It’s only after you’ve lost everything...that you’re free to do anything.”<sup>374</sup> In most cases that would involve either shooting your face off, getting beaten to a pulp or starving yourself to death while being fed lead pills with acid and mercury.

The three novels I have chosen all have main characters that “self-destruct,” meaning they subject their bodies to pain, mutilation and suffering as a means to an “authentic existence” and as a “source of redemption,”<sup>375</sup> as a counter balance to postmodern culture’s “emptying subjects of meaning.”<sup>376</sup> Pain was a central part of authenticating masculinity in *Fight Club*, identity and spiritual growth in *Invisible Monsters*, and functions as a means of authenticating the self in *Diary* as well as connecting to others. In a society where human emotions have taken a back seat, pain is the only tool which can be used to gain connection, as becomes apparent through Misty’s ritual of sticking needles through Peter: “She pokes the pin of the hairy old brooch...through the meat of your hand or your foot or your arm. Until she hits a bone or it pokes out the other side... And she whispers, ‘Can you feel this?’”<sup>377</sup> Further down on the page, Misty points out that “she still loves you. She wouldn’t bother to torture you if she didn’t.” The point here is reflected in the sentence “can you feel this?” which symbolizes the anesthetized existence of the characters Palahniuk tends to write about. The only way to “wake up” or snap out of this mechanized, robotic life is to subject your body to pain, to *make* yourself feel something.

The pain and suffering presented in *Diary* is very reminiscent of Tyler Durden’s philosophy of destroying something beautiful in order to create something which goes beyond the limitations of society. This view is represented through the character of Dr. Touchet, Misty’s doctor, who is feeding her poison in order for her to paint her masterpieces. However, pain and suffering in self-destruction presents itself in a different way in *Diary*, as opposed to the other novels. While self-destruction has had a more positive outcome for the previous two novels, suggesting a sweet rather than a bitter ending where individuality and

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<sup>373</sup> Angel, “This Theatre of Mass Destruction,” 59.

<sup>374</sup> *Fight Club*, 70.

<sup>375</sup> Slade, “On Mutilation: The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk’s Fiction,” 62.

<sup>376</sup> Ng, “Destruction and Discourse of Deformity,” 24.

<sup>377</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 41.



connection have been restored, self-destruction and mutilation have not had a redeeming power on the characters in this story. In regards to Peter, his self-mutilating efforts of sticking brooches “through their foreheads, their nipples,”<sup>378</sup> in order to attract the woman who would save the island, resulted in his coma because it was something society required of him. Now in a coma, described as “a brain-dead vegetable with a tube up [his] ass...a knotted up mess,” he serves only to exemplify the crippling force of societal limitations on the individual.

With Misty the self-destruction was unconscious, and perhaps that is where the difference lies. By not making conscious efforts of destroying the self in order to regain personal freedom, like Shannon does by shooting off her face, Misty has created her own nightmare of a situation, and stands herself as the creator of her own little hell. She remarks, “Misty herself trapped and wasting away, poisoned with headaches, if the doctor is right she could be walking on water. She could raise the dead.”<sup>379</sup> However, all she does is “listens and paints,”<sup>380</sup> and keeps on painting, and by doing so, she is painting her own nightmare, so to speak. By the conscious act of creating the pictures for the island, Misty is keeping the legend alive, gender roles and individual restraint included. Christina Angel explains that, “the metaphor is extended...to include forms of art as metaphors for the construction of bodies. Misty draws the houses on Wayansea Island, and paints a masterpiece work of the entire town, the construction which nearly deprives her of life – her artist’s expression is so much an extension of herself that she can no longer separate them.”<sup>381</sup> To solidify this, the image of Plato’s cave comes to view again: “How your head is the cave, your eyes are the cave mouth. How you live inside your head and only see what you want. How you only watch the shadows and make up your own meaning.”<sup>382</sup> At the same time, “the link between the body, the word, and the world is entirely dissolved to the interior of the mind,”<sup>383</sup> denoting that what you only see is ultimately yourself. Peter clarifies this as the artist’s ultimate doom; that being egotism: “‘The only thing an artist can do is describe his own face.’...Your handwriting. The way you walk...It’s all giving you away...Everything is a self-portrait,” and ultimately, you are “doomed to being you.”<sup>384</sup> This notion of everything being self-perception is also something

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<sup>378</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 207.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>381</sup> Angel, “This Theatre of Mass Destruction,” 59.

<sup>382</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 253.

<sup>383</sup> Angel, “This Theatre of Mass Destruction,” 60.

<sup>384</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 132.

that was relevant in *Invisible Monsters*; that the post-modern American world's doom is only seeing oneself, because that is all we want to see.

Carl Jung calls this "shadow projection". It refers to the unconscious aspect of the human personality; an unconscious aspect the personality does not identify itself with. The shadow is prone to projection, meaning it can project negative aspects unto others, thus giving the shadow "a free hand [to] realize its object...or bring about some other situation characteristic of its power." In turn, these projections incapacitate and paralyze individuals by creating a deeper blur between the ego and reality.<sup>385</sup> What we only see then are different aspects of ourselves falling onto others, which in turn only makes us see ourselves, "our limited personal perception."<sup>386</sup> Consequently, through all of her paintings, drawings and doodling, Misty has only created a picture of herself and ultimately of her own world. Perhaps Palahniuk here suggests that individuals do have power to create the world they are living in, but are unable to do so because of the limited perception, the navel gazing, which only leads to their ultimate self-destruction and doom? Misty believed, like Palahniuk's other characters do, that the love story was going to be her way out, Peter was her way out of repeating her mother's life of poverty and suffering, however, she learns that "there is no escape."<sup>387</sup> Although I agree with Andrew Slade regarding the sublime elements in Palahniuk's works, I do not agree that *Diary* "endorses the old saw that there is redemption in suffering."<sup>388</sup> Yes, Misty succeeds in escaping Waytansea Island but she did not manage to escape the repetition of her life seeing as she has failed twice already and that Tabbi will likely see to that the tradition is kept alive. Misty is not saved at all or redeemed, but instead trapped in her own nightmare, which, I will claim, makes this novel stand out from the previous of Palahniuk's books in that it is a true work of horror.

## **The Diary of Chuck:**

### **Gothic, Horror and Form**

Without hesitation, the novel falls in the category of horror, critics claiming it to be a "top drawer horror novel,"<sup>389</sup> "daring...ominous, shocking,"<sup>390</sup> reminiscent of classic horror tales

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<sup>385</sup> C.G Jung, "Phenomenology of the Self," in *The Portable Jung* (New York: Penguin Books, 1951), 147.

<sup>386</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 253.

<sup>387</sup> Slade, "On Mutilation," 69.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> The Seattle Times/Post-Intelligencer, Review on the back of *Diary*.

such as Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* and *Rosemary's Baby*.<sup>391</sup> Perhaps this is not so surprising, seeing as the previous books I have mentioned also contained elements used in both the Gothic and Horror genre, and also the fact that Palahniuk himself loves Horror.<sup>392</sup> However, *Diary* is the one novel – besides *Haunted* – that borrows the most from the genres in order to invoke terror and warning. A passage from Stephen King's *Danse Macabre*, a mediation on the horror genre, seems to fit well as a description of Palahniuk's aesthetic: "So, terror on top, horror below it, and lowest of all, the gag reflex of revulsion...I recognize terror as the finest emotion...and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; and if I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud."<sup>393</sup>

Horror is a difficult genre to define as it has been, as Aalya Ahmad claims in her dissertation, severely overlooked in printed form by scholars. However, she defines horror as "...texts that contrive through their narrative strategies to create, contemplate and cultivate... 'horror responses,' including fear, dread and revulsion responses, to make these responses their focus and their *raison d'être*."<sup>394</sup> Her focus is pertinent to Palahniuk's work in the sense that these "horror responses" call into question "the borders between mind and body,"<sup>395</sup> something Palahniuk seems to consistently play with. It is these responses, the "fight or flight" response, jumps of shock and recoiling of the reader or viewer that normally seduces cinematic audiences, that one also finds in Palahniuk's fiction; like the "cinematic narratives offer...moments that linger in the viewer's mind," through mutilation and pain - the sense of being in a nightmare - so does his fiction linger.<sup>396</sup>

Horror, then, aims to provoke its reader to react with fear, disgust or revulsion, much because it leaves a bigger mark than "happy" tales of love, as Misty points out: "We have no

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<sup>390</sup> Chicago Sun-Times, Review in Acclaim for Chuck Palahniuk's *Diary, Diary* (Anchor Books: New York, 2003).

<sup>391</sup> BookPage, Review in Acclaim for Chuck Palahniuk's *Diary, Diary* (Anchor Books: New York, 2003).

<sup>392</sup> Matt Kavanaugh, "Of Failed Romance, Writer's Malpractice, And Prose for the Nose: A Conversation With Chuck Palahniuk," 181.

<sup>393</sup> Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Everest House, 1981, Berkeley: New York, 2001), 25.

<sup>394</sup> Aalya Ahmad, "Bordering On Fear: A Comparative Literary Study of Horror Fiction," *Dissertation* (Ottawa, Canada: Carleton University, 2010), 15.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>396</sup> Ahmad, "Bordering On Fear: A Comparative Literary Study of Horror Fiction," 16

scar to show for happiness. We learn so little from peace.”<sup>397</sup> This suggests that destruction and self-destruction are a part of human nature, something Misty’s mom points out to her: “Child labor in mines or mills, she’d say. Slavery. Drugs... Monopolies. Disease. War. Every fortune comes out of something unpleasant.”<sup>398</sup> This also reflects the essence of horror; the feeling of coming so close to terror, to “getting the shit scared out of you – and loving it; an exchange mediated by adrenaline.”<sup>399</sup> Philip Brophy uses the term “horrority” when describing the relationship between a horror movie’s horror, textuality, morality and hilarity. The term is applicable to literature in that it is a “mode of fiction, a type of writing that in the fullest sense ‘plays’ with its reader, engaging the reader in a dialogue of textual manipulation.”<sup>400</sup> In this sense, linking to *Diary* and Palahniuk’s works, the sense of “play” is apparent through the use of caricature, exaggerating gender phenomena that appear in the American post-modern society. In special regards to the social restraints applied to gender and the individual that appear in *Diary*, Brophy points out that “‘Horrority’ involves the construction, deployment and manipulation of horror... as a textual mode,” where the subject is “a willing target that both constructs the terror and is terrorized by its construction.”<sup>401</sup> This describes the horror of the situation Misty is in; an individual falling victim to a self-created terror, one’s own personal doom haunted by ghosts from the past and images from the future. By using the horror genre, Palahniuk manages to create a megaphone to shout his stories through, stories that will be heard and “sit” with his audience.

Another aspect of horror that is very relatable to *Diary*, and the previous novels I have analyzed, is the destruction of the body. Brophy explains that: “The contemporary Horror film tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one’s own body, of how one controls and relates to it.”<sup>402</sup> As Misty comments in *Diary*: “You have endless ways you can commit suicide without *dying* dying.”<sup>403</sup> Palahniuk suggests that there are worse things that can destroy a body than death, thus explaining why his characters come so close to destruction but never actually *die* die. The more crippling, debilitating and terrorizing aspects of society that Palahniuk is criticizing is the loss of control of one’s own

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<sup>397</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 213.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>399</sup> Philip Brophy, “Horrority—the textuality of contemporary horror films,” *Screen 27*, no. 1 (1986): 2-13, 5.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>403</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 40.

individuality (body) to society's suffocating claws, demolishing the aspects of human life in which we connect to each other. However, in a way, Palahniuk flips this concept around; while the horror in horror movies "is conveyed through torture and agony of havoc wrought upon a body devoid of control,"<sup>404</sup> Palahniuk uses images of torture on bodies in order for them to gain control. The physical pain that Brandy Alexander puts herself through in *Invisible Monsters* is not to demonstrate the loss of control, but the restoration of control in the individual, the control and power to create one's own identity. However, *Diary* serves as a great example of what Brophy is arguing: Misty's body is tortured to the point where it is grotesque looking and almost non-functional, on the verge of becoming what Peter has become. Yet, all is not lost, and what Palahniuk then offers the reader, as a salvation, is to demonstrate "the awesome physical power that the mind has over its own body,"<sup>405</sup> and what the individual is actually capable of doing if only awareness is brought to the subject. This view is perhaps most prevalent of the story in *Diary* as it demonstrates how only one individual has the power of the construction and destruction of a whole society, yet fails because she is unaware of her own abilities.

*Diary* contains many elements of horror; however, Linda J. Holland-Toll argues that "a great many fictions which are not readily recognizable or strictly definable as horror...have such strong elements of horror embedded within them that the emotional engagement many readers experience locates them in horror territory."<sup>406</sup> The novel plays on feelings of terror and fright, though its tendency to "reflect internalized and socially-related fears" edges *Diary* in the direction of the Gothic. Heidi Ashbaugh explains that "While the genre of horror concentrates mainly on the feelings of fear and dread, the Gothic novel contains fearful and dreadful situations placed within a certain social environment and physical landscape."<sup>407</sup>

The Gothic stems back several centuries at it emerged in the Age of Reason, challenging reason by depicting madness, superstition, barbarism and taboo. It is hard to determine exactly what the Gothic is, seeing as there are many sub-groups of the genre, but the elements that are considered gothic are castles, mansions, darkness, ghosts and the psychological aspect of the human mind. Sherry R. Truffin argues that the Gothic "can be

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<sup>404</sup> Brophy, "Horrority—the textuality of contemporary horror films," 10.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>406</sup> Linda J. Holland-Toll, *As American as Mom, Baseball and Apple Pie: Constructing Community in Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U Popular Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>407</sup> Ashbaugh, "Chuck Palahniuk's *Diary*: American Horror, Gothic, and Beyond," 125

claustrophobic, paranoid literature...skeptical of the Enlightenment faith that humanity can be perfected and anxiously aware of the damage inflicted by its schemes for achieving perfection.”<sup>408</sup> This is something Palahniuk critiques in his novels, as I have mentioned previously; the American dream of socioeconomical success is shown again and again through his unhappy characters that have achieved all the measures of success yet still feel discontented and disconnected. Chris Baldick explains that the Gothic fears the “inherited powers and corruptions of feudal aristocracy...which threaten still to fix [their] dead hand upon us.”<sup>409</sup> This view is particularly prevalent in *Diary* as the old families at Waytansea Island, the aristocracy, congregate in order to keep their rituals and legends alive for the sake of saving the island. Other elements linking *Diary* to the Gothic are the need to convey a message, as Misty does in the end to warn her reincarnated self, something typically done by female heroines. The pills she is prescribed are actually poisoned, and there lurks a dark family secret within the decayed Waytansea hotel, which functions as the “haunted castle.” Ashbaugh observes that Misty is held prisoner in the hotel, much like traditional Gothic heroines are held captive in cellars or nunneries, making the castle represent the victim’s entrapment due to “physical and social restraints.”<sup>410</sup> Misty is held captive on the island first economically, because she is from a lower class and does not have the money to escape, and second physically by “hurting” her knee. Another restraint is also the social aspect of the forced gender and identity roles: in order for the legend to come true one man has to marry a girl, this girl has to be an artist, has to have a child which has to die, and it has to be Misty – always. The castle then can be “abstracted even to the point of representing the individual psychology of one’s mind...The voyage can be an actual physical escape, but it can also be construed as a mental voyage and escape from constraining values.”<sup>411</sup> The entrapment in the hotel room also signifies her mental entrapment in that she is blind to see the destructive function she has and that she is the one creating her own reality.

What is interesting to note is that the majority of Gothic novels that emerged between 1770 and 1840 were written and read by women. Particularly during the 1790s, the Gothic novels were “feminized – disparaged in gender-specific ways – by a critical establishment

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<sup>408</sup> Truffin, “This is what passes for free will,” 74.

<sup>409</sup> Chris Baldick, Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 74.

<sup>410</sup> Ashbaugh, “Chuck Palahniuk’s *Diary*,” 126.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

outraged by both the passion and the widespread popularity of the form.”<sup>412</sup> A differentiating pattern evolved as the genre divided itself between the Male Gothic, written by men and often portraying the woman as a victim, and the Female Gothic where “the central figure is a woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine.”<sup>413</sup> In her book, *Femicidal Fears*, Helene Meyers discusses how critics consider the way the genre has allowed women writers and readers to protest traditional gender roles,<sup>414</sup> creating a link between literature and the actual social situation for women. The Female Gothic, then, concerns itself with the themes of “a woman’s place in society and the home,” “the precarious nature of marital relationships,” and the “fear of entrapment caused by maternity and motherhood.”<sup>415</sup> All of these themes are visible in *Diary* and are expressed mostly through Misty by her dreams of a domesticated home, family and motherhood. Lastly, the Female Gothic offers a limited point of view of the female heroine, making the reader share both the mistaken perceptions of the heroine and her ignorance. This is also very prevalent in *Diary* as it is written from Misty’s point of view, although there has been some debate on whether or not it is Grace who is writing the diary since it has a third person narrative.<sup>416</sup>

Another dimension to the Female Gothic novel is the occurrence of secondary hidden texts, which is an example of a traditional Gothic storyline device. This hidden text comes in the form of Peter’s scrawled writings on the wall of summer homes he has remodeled. On one hand it symbolizes the distance that has been created between the sexes through societal restraints, both in the fact that Peter is unable to feel pain and in turn feel Misty’s pain, which also is reflected in Peter’s writings in the closed-up rooms: “...her hair’s gone gray and smells like the shit she uses to scrub out your toilets when she crawls into bed next to me...we haven’t had sex in three years.”<sup>417</sup> On the other hand, this may be a wink to another central

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<sup>412</sup> Bradford K. Mudge, “The Man with Two Brains: Gothic Novels, Popular Culture, Literary History, *PMLA*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (Jan., 1992), pp. 92-104, 93. Published by: Modern Language Association, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462803>.

<sup>413</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, 91 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc, 1976), 91.

<sup>414</sup> Meyer, *Femicidal Fears*, 26.

<sup>415</sup> Ashbaugh, “Chuck Palahniuk’s *Diary*,” 128.

<sup>416</sup> Christina Angel argues that the “you” narrator is unspecified and could be both the voice of Misty and Grace. “This Theatre of Mass Destruction,” 57.

<sup>417</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 25.

story in the Female Gothic tradition, as Kathy Farquaharson points out that: “Although it stops short of being a retelling, *Diary* is a novel haunted by “The Yellow Wallpaper.”<sup>418</sup>

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is a short story written by author Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892. It has played a large part in feminist literature as it illustrates attitudes regarding women’s position in nineteenth century society, and also their physical and mental health. The story is a first person narrative; a collection of journal entries of a woman trapped in a room, recuperating from depression and hysteria, forbidden to do any work. The story, then, becomes the depiction of a woman’s descent into psychosis, as she becomes obsessed by the yellow wallpaper and eventually surrenders herself to becoming one with the wall. Misty, on the other hand, does not sink into a psychosis; rather, the scribbling on the wall brings her out of her psychosis and she comes to the realization that society was at fault.

There are a lot of similarities in the stories, as Farquaharson points out in her article. Both women “interrogate the walls themselves, engaging with the space/architecture, inside/outside, public/private that raged throughout the century that separates [them].”<sup>419</sup> However, what is interesting to note here is the similarity between “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Diary* in their relation to the written text on the wall and what it represents. At first glance, the wallpaper in Gilman’s story is soiled, ripped, an “unclean yellow,” and the narrator wonders “how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for. Round and round and round...it makes me dizzy!”<sup>420</sup> Misty also has trouble deciphering the writings on the walls at first, dismissing it as “just crazy talk,” “gibberish,” and nauseating, as the words are written “in a big spiral that starts at the ceiling and spins to the floor, around and around so you have to stand in the center of the room and turn to read it until you’re dizzy, until it makes you sick.”<sup>421</sup> However, after a while, the scribbling becomes understandable text and reveals a new dimension to the story. Many critics have tried to interpret what the writings on the wall mean, and many feminist readings of “The Yellow Wallpaper” have suggested that the wallpaper represents “male text – the patriarchal medical discourse of John (the narrator’s

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<sup>418</sup> Kathy Farquaharson, “The anchoress and the graffiti: *Diary* and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’,” *Sacred and Immoral: On the writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, ed. Jeffrey Sartain (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 116.

<sup>419</sup> Farquaharson, “The anchoress and the graffiti: *Diary* and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’,” 116-117.

<sup>420</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *Women Who Did: Stories by Men and Women, 1890-1914*, ed. A Richardson (Penguin: London, 2002), 43.

<sup>421</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 55, 101, 27.



husband and physician) and his mentor Silas Weird Mitchell.”<sup>422</sup> The story then, tells the tale of the suppression of women, something one can claim when analyzing the subtext in *Diary*. Instead of wallpaper patterns, the subtext is really text, and it is a “male text” written by Misty’s husband Peter, who represents the patriarchal discourse in *Diary*. In both stories, the writings on the wall signify an oppressive force that the female heroine succumbs to, although it can be interpreted that Gilman’s character overcomes the oppressive might in the end.

However, like with Gilman’s text, Palahniuk’s text goes beyond critiquing American society through its characters and symbolism; in *Diary*, Palahniuk is playing with gender in form as well as in his characters. As mentioned in regards to addressing the Female Gothic, Palahniuk is writing in a genre intended for women writers and a female audience. Ashbaugh observes that Palahniuk has done something “extremely interesting” by writing from a female protagonist’s viewpoint in a genre, which has been long dominated by women. She also notes “Because the roles played by the female characters differ from contemporary norms, it seems that Palahniuk’s work opens the way for new ideas in women’s and feminist critical study.”<sup>423</sup> While he blatantly attacks traditional gender roles and gender dichotomy through his portrayal of characters in *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*, *Diary* stands out in its critique of traditional gender roles through the use of genre and form. The “playing,” i.e. “critiquing,” comes through the use of the Female Gothic and actually through the use of the diary, or journal, form. The form, as well with the Female Gothic genre, has been used for expressing social critique, tying literature and social analysis together. It is then interesting to look at what Palahniuk achieves by writing in both a form and style that has been dominated by women.

The diary has long traditions in both non-fictional and in fictional literature. The non-fictional diary developed into four identifiable traditions by the early nineteenth century: The accounts of a household, the spiritual diary, family records and the travel diary.<sup>424</sup> The diary form became a relevant concept in the nineteenth century, much due to the Romantic period’s value of private experience and self-expression. The urge towards self-definition “was fired by a new sensibility giving both a voice to the concept of ‘I’ and a link to the subjectivity and

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<sup>422</sup> Farquharson, “The anchoress and the graffiti: *Diary* and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’,” 118.

<sup>423</sup> Ashbaugh, “Chuck Palahniuk’s *Diary*,” 143.

<sup>424</sup> Catherine Delafield, “Chapter 1: The Diary in the Nineteenth Century,” *Women’s Diaries as Narratives in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, ed. Catherine Delafield (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 9.

authority of private experience.”<sup>425</sup> The diary form then became a device used to document series of events in one’s life and could be described as a “serial autobiography” or a “non linear book of the self,” as Robert Fothergill describes it.<sup>426</sup> For women in the Victorian age, the separation of different spheres dominated; the woman was a “moral touchstone” and a “domestic object,” and the domestic space was identified and constructed through “advice manuals.” The maintenance of the home and taking care of the children were duties of moral and patriotic value, and the act of writing by women was seen as a breach of etiquette. This view is prevalent in “The Yellow Wallpaper” as the narrator’s husband forbids her to do any work, including writing in her diary. The personal diary then, critics argue, became the “feminine form of writing which [rebelled] against the ideology of the home which [created] it;”<sup>427</sup> women needed this private, culturally sanctioned sphere because they were excluded from all other arenas, and used it to fight patriarchal structures and modes of expression.<sup>428</sup>

The diary form became an arena for marginalized groups to be heard, something Palahniuk also strives for and succeeds in doing through *Diary*. He does not only create a voice for women living in post-modern America, but also creates a voice for himself, and through that challenges traditional concepts of gender by writing in the genre of Female Gothic, and also in the female dominated form of the diary. He makes it clear through the use of this particular form that traditional gender roles are still alive today, and offers a potential solution that portrays the importance of literary history and the significance of marginalized characters. Misty notes, “This is the worst part of her day, writing this. It was your mother, Grace, who had the bright idea about Misty keeping a coma diary...it’s a treasured seafaring tradition.”<sup>429</sup> Misty’s diary would act as a traditional diary would do; it would record all the events that occurred in one’s life: “How the kids grew up. What the weather did. A record of everything.”<sup>430</sup> However, Misty also realizes the uselessness in retelling the “...everyday shit you and Misty would bore each other with over dinner,” and fails to see what potential power that lies in recording this specific diary, until the very end.

As Gilman’s story stands as an important piece in feminist writing, *Diary* also claims its prominent place in the gender discourse as Misty realizes what her diary can do, something

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<sup>425</sup> Catherine Delafield, “Chapter 1: The Diary in the Nineteenth Century,” 11.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>429</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 39.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

she expresses in her “letter” to Palahniuk himself at the end, asking him to publish her work in the hopes of it being read by “as many people as possible,” and enlightening “just one person.”<sup>431</sup> *Diary* then, serves as a testament to a fossilized society, “diseased” by their traditional gender roles and gender dichotomies. Unlike the previous novels, this narrative adopts, through its choice of form, the role in which previous diaries written by women have had: the ability to leave a signature of ourselves, of our time, because “we all want to leave our signature. Our lasting effect... We all want to explain ourselves. Nobody wants to be forgotten,”<sup>432</sup> in the hopes of saving the next generation.

*Diary* sets itself apart from the two other novels I have chosen by portraying gender as something irreversible, not fluid and moldable like in *Invisible Monsters* and *Fight Club*, illustrating a vivid warning to future generations. However, what does link these three novels together is the sole act of storytelling, and connection through stories; the ability to observe the reconnection that occurs between humans that goes beyond the body. Because, as Palahniuk himself says, “The world is made of people telling stories... We live our lives according to stories. About being Irish or being black. About working hard or shooting heroin. Being male or female.”<sup>433</sup> It is about sharing something of yourself, our little signature, that prompts others to share something of themselves and individuals coming together as a group – a means to reconnect as humans in a time of disconnect. Although *Misty* fails in reconnecting with the community, or regaining a sense of love and belonging, Palahniuk comments that, “Even if the characters are destroyed or remain unenlightened, I hope the reader recognizes their errors and is less likely to make those same mistakes.”<sup>434</sup>

*Diary* sets itself apart from the other novels I have analyzed by not explicitly attacking the binary gender categories by distorting or caricaturing them. Instead, the novel presents, and in that critiques, post-modern American society as a culture that has stopped evolving, thus leading to fossilized and static gender roles. This in turn results in the power of identity-building and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles are in the sole hands of society. Individuality is shunned and characters are trapped in their gender; they become pawns as a means to an end, leaving them docile and self-destructive. While the other main characters in both *Invisible Monsters* and *Fight Club* turn to self-destruction as a means of escaping the gender boundaries that keep them from reconnecting to community, *Misty* fails to escape hers

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<sup>431</sup> Palahniuk, *Diary*, 262.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>433</sup> Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*, xix-xxi.

<sup>434</sup> Kavanaugh, “On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk,” 190.

because her self-destruction is at the hands of society and not herself. Using the genres of Gothic and Horror through the medium of the journal, Palahniuk is able to come full circle in using literature as social critique.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have studied how Chuck Palahniuk's main characters in *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Diary* have deconstructed normative notions of gender. Through my discussion of these works, I have shown how Palahniuk deals with different aspects of gender in American society, be it femininity/masculinity or the dichotomous relationship between gay/straight, and also how his writing unearths an underlying critique of American society. My aim has been to show how the shunning of the binary gender categories has led to reconnection and a reestablishment of individual authenticity for the characters. Approaching Palahniuk's texts this way has opened up to an exploration of a world that goes beyond categorization, labeling, class and race, displaying the beauty and possibility of looking beyond labels and to unite through difference. Through his characters, Palahniuk gives voice to the marginalized groups in American society, be it the sex addicts, the monsters or intersexed, which only proves what gender theorists have argued for all along: that we are more than our anatomy.

Palahniuk, then, mirrors many of the current trends and debates about gender. By playing with traditional concepts of gender, gender roles and sexual identity, Palahniuk displays the destructive and restrictive results these social gender boundaries have on individuals and depicts these boundaries to the point where they are rendered ridiculous and meaningless. These notions follow the ideas proposed by noted gender theorists such as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir argued in her book *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one," implying that the category of women, or gender, is a cultural accomplishment, meaning one is not born with gender, but rather, acquires it. Gender seen as a cultural phenomenon is something that has been relevant throughout my discussion of Palahniuk's works, however, it is the extension of these notions, made by Butler, regarding gender that has proven most relevant to my discussion. Butler argues in response to de Beauvoir's affirmation of one born with a sex, "if sex and gender are radically distinct, then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender."<sup>435</sup> This implies that gender is not restricted to the two usual genders, but allows for one to be a number of different genders. Butler argues for gender as an activity, or a performance; a set of repeated gestures and movements that establish a set of meanings that make up a gendered self or identity. Palahniuk confirms these notions of sex and gender as

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<sup>435</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 152.

something socially constructed, but ultimately emphasizes what Butler argues, that the power to determine and govern sex, gender and identity lies with the subject.

The issues of gender and liminal gender binaries, point to the ailments that hinder Palahniuk's characters of achieving individuality, freedom, authenticity, connectivity to the community and ultimately love. In order to attain these goals, the characters challenge the normative notions of gender and seek to confront, destroy and distort them through the acts of self-mutilation, self-destruction and pain. Following both Andrew Ng and Andrew Slade's arguments, the postmodern body stands as a site of power between society and individual, and also as a means of authenticity and identity formation. The dilemma of authenticity echoes throughout all three of Palahniuk's works, showing itself through the narrator in *Fight Club*'s observation of simulacra, everything being "a copy of a copy;" through Brandy's statement "Anything we want we're trained to want" in *Invisible Monsters*; and through Misty's three previous identical lives in *Diary*. The body, then, has become invalid, as it is seen as a socio-ideological construction that only takes on significance if it embodies "labels."<sup>436</sup> Palahniuk's characters seek to destroy these labels, and the employment of such destruction requires self-mutilation and pain, suggesting that suffering and mutilation are the only means of achieving an authentic identity in postmodern American society.

My main argument for the significance of gender in the chapter on *Fight Club* follows the arguments of both Faludi and Kimmel in that there indeed exists a "crisis in masculinity" in the novel. However, my argument stretches beyond this point, proving through the effeminate men appearing in the novel, the distortions in overly masculine men and the masculine/androgynous women that there is not only a crisis in masculinity but in gender as a whole. Because of the loss of the Self-Made Man, according to Kimmel, father figures, the gain of industrialization and the results of the feminist movement, the previously clear boundaries between the binary genders ultimately have become blurred. The testicular support group "Remaining Men Together" is my chief argument for these gender distortions: men have been "overly-feminized" by embodying female traits such as conversations on feelings, hugging and interior designing. Perhaps the most explicit sign of this distortion is the physical appearance of the men's bodies; they are without testicles, their "manhood," and some have also developed breasts (Bob). The male identity and gender is lost, resulting in misery for the narrator and a general malaise in the male population, thus ensuing a renaissance of old male ideals, which comes forth through Tyler Durden.

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<sup>436</sup> Ng, "Destruction and Discourse of Deformity," 25

However, Tyler Durden is not the answer to this “crisis” either, as his “overly-masculine” ways are seen as utterly destructive, both for society as a whole and for the male identity. Although the regime for which Tyler Durden stands for brings the men together, the regime also becomes a society without love, connectivity, and perhaps the most important, authenticity. Also, the realization that Tyler Durden is the narrator’s own hallucination not only figures as a symbol for the novel’s battle with the two sexes, but it also illustrates the image of the “ideal” man as nothing but a dream or illusion. In order to “save” or create a new masculine identity, as well as female identity, the answer is to embrace both lairs, or rather deconstruct both, as is done through the character of Marla. My argument for the significance of Marla comes forth through her ability to challenge normative gender roles by embodying both male and female traits, and is empowered by it. Her hybridity differs from that of the feminized men by a self-conscious choice: while the men become feminized because of passiveness, Marla achieves authenticity by making a conscious choice in choosing to embody both genders. To her, gender is not a false escape, but a means to a meaningful life. In relation to the narrator, she functions as an alternative solution to his masculine crisis. The narrator’s ultimate desire is for love and reconnection, however, Tyler’s world does not provide him with the necessary tools to love Marla, only to “have” her as a possession. Marla then, I have argued, offers the narrator a means to escape from a society where gender boundaries separate rather than unite. This confirms my argument in how Palahniuk through his characters deconstructs normative gender categories and constructs a new identity and regains connectivity because of the shunning of such boundaries.

The boundaries of gender are stretched further in *Invisible Monsters*. Following Andrew Slade’s argument of Palahniuk’s employment of the body as a site of power and transition, I argued that the characters in *Invisible Monsters* use their bodies to attack and deconstruct traditional concepts of sexual identity through self-mutilation, pain and suffering. Because identity, appearance and gender formation appear so tightly bound to mass production, individuality and authenticity cease to exist and entrapment and isolation ensues for the characters. In order for Shannon and Brandy/Shane to obtain freedom, spiritual growth and reconnection, they must go beyond their bodies’ limits and the labels constructed by society, and explore what exists beyond categories.

My argument for Shannon’s escape and ability to challenge concepts of identity and identity formation is that Palahniuk employs themes and symbols from the Gothic. By using Punter and Byron’s understanding of the monster as a “constructed nature” and the embodiment of tendencies that are repressed or abjected in a specific culture in order to

challenge limits, Shannon's monstrous qualities are the symbol of challenging these limits. By displaying a mutilated face, Shannon is exposing what has become an "illness" in postmodern American society; an external locus of identity and gender solely based on beauty and appearance. Although she is shunned by society because her mutilation has rendered her "ugly" and indefinable, Shannon has obtained freedom from the enslavement of beauty and leading to an individually constructed identity thus leading to authenticity. However, it is through Brandy/Shane's monstrous beauty that reveals Palahniuk's intent on challenging normative notions of sexual identity. As a means of escaping labels and moving beyond anatomy in order to attain freedom, Shane opts to become a woman because it goes against everything society has "trained" him to want. By doing this, Shane is escaping the labels attached to his assigned gender, and in turn revolts against a society built on socially constructed categories by moving outside of the labels and mocking post-modern society's beauty ideals. My main argument here follows Butler's theories on gender performance; that Brandy "performs" as female and plays with "gender reality" by being biologically and emotionally male. By letting Shane perform as Brandy, Palahniuk is showing the struggle and perception of authenticity in postmodern American society, as well as challenging the binary categories of man/woman and gay/straight.

My chief argument for the motivation behind Shannon and Shane's shunning of the gender categories and identity formation in American society is the desire for reconnection and love. This echoes an overall tendency regarding the motivational factor behind Palahniuk's characters, which is about "a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people."<sup>437</sup> Only through becoming monsters and embracing their deviant nature can they restore the connection between brother and sister. By handing over her identity to Shane, a pure act of love, Shannon moves beyond her body while at the same time giving Shane the opportunity to continue to challenge normative gender notions as a transgender beauty icon. This act of love could only be achieved through the embracement of divergence, by shunning the labels and gender categorization that were only creating loneliness, separation and spiritual regression.

The discussion on *Diary* expose a deeper layer to Palahniuk's critique on gendered American society through its sociological aspect. I argued that the chapter diverges from the previous ones by portraying a gendered situation from which there is no escape, issuing rather a warning to future generations than a means of escape. My main argument for this chapter

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<sup>437</sup> Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*, xv.



was that society creates its own stereotypes and gender categories, not the individual, thus leading to the death of individuality on behalf of society. My chief examples of this are the inhabitants of Waytansa Island where basically everybody is related, and of course Misty who is trapped in simulacra, repeating a life she has lived three times before. This repeated life is the ultimate negation of self, and ultimately serves to disconnect Misty from herself and from her authenticity. These examples, and their grim outcome of stunted progression, serve as testimony to what *not* to do as a culture. The situation in this novel illustrates just how dangerous the stifling of gender and society as a whole is; how not learning from previous mistakes will lead you to repeat them over and over again. Through this depiction, Palahniuk also critiques the general notions of what being successful means in postmodern American society; that the side-effect of society's demand of what it means to have succeeded is always isolation and disconnectedness: "We get there, and we're alone. We're lonely."<sup>438</sup> Although Misty has achieved the things that are perceived by society as successful, she is still left in a state of disconnectedness, loveless and anesthetized existence, and still bound and chained by a society that upholds traditional gender roles to which she falls victim.

By using elements from both Gothic and Horror genre, I argue that Palahniuk achieves not only a shocking effect in his audience and thus a means to spread his overall message, but an entrance into a deeper critique of gender. Horror, as Aalya Ahmad argues, calls into question the borders between mind and body through revulsion, fear or disgust, which in turn makes the moments linger longer in the reader's mind. By creating these "horror responses" in the reader, the novel leaves a bigger mark than if the story was presented without them, which explains Palahniuk's utilization of them and his extensive use of self-mutilation and pain. While the other two narrators have regained control of their body and thus their identity through self-mutilation, Misty's encounter with torture and pain serves not only to depict the destructive power of a society that upholds rigidity in terms of gender and identity, but also shows how destruction is avoidable if only one is aware.

*Diary* does not necessarily challenge gender roles through its characters like the previous novels' have done. Although gender critique is distinguishable throughout the text, the challenge of normative notions of gender is more prevalent in Palahniuk's use of genre and form. Not only does *Diary* contain Horror elements, it also employs elements found in the Gothic genre, which serves as my argument for Palahniuk's critique of American society. This is most prevalent in the story's employment of elements from the Female Gothic such as

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<sup>438</sup> Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*, xv.

the central figure being both victim and heroine, and also its constant winks to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's text "The Yellow Wallpaper." This short story, and most stories from the Female Gothic genre, functioned as a means for women writers to protest against traditional gender roles and the general suppression of women during the nineteenth century. By using the genre intended for women, Palahniuk is challenging traditional notions of gender by writing within the genre as a man while at the same time underlining literature's ability for social critique. Gender is further critiqued by his use of form; by using the diary or journal form as a means of expressing Misty and Waytansea Island's situation, Palahniuk is again using an established field of literary writing predominantly used by women. The diary form served as a place reserved for the woman and her need for self-expression in a time where this was not possible in the public sphere. The diary, then, became the space in which women could rebel against the ideology of the home and a patriarchal society, and gives voice to otherwise marginalized voices in society. Palahniuk uses the form for exactly the same reason, to give voice to marginalized groups in society, while at the same time reminding the reader of the importance of literary history and the avoidance of repeated traditional and liminal notions of gender.

*Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Diary* all challenge what exists as normative notions of gender today, yet in each their own way. The ideas regarding gender that are expressed through Palahniuk's writing is perhaps mostly mirroring current ideas in the discourse of gender, that being to challenge the categories of gender and what is considered "normal." Nevertheless, Palahniuk's contribution marks the importance of literature's place in the discourse of gender in that it gives room to the voices that occupy the margins of society and space to explore alternative, but very real, worlds. In his book *Stranger Than Fiction*, Palahniuk writes: "It's hard to call any of my novels fiction," signifying his novels' abilities to transcend and challenge what the reader perceives of reality. Many of the stories he writes are based on true stories; *Fight Club* is based on his friends' stories told at parties,<sup>439</sup> *Invisible Monsters* on telephone sex calls,<sup>440</sup> and *Diary* on stories from carpenter friends.<sup>441</sup> Although his stories are works of fiction, they are based on factual lives because "we live our lives according to stories."<sup>442</sup> Storytelling has served the purpose of connecting and uniting individuals for centuries, acting as glue to link history together or informing the present about

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<sup>439</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 215

<sup>440</sup> Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*, xix

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., xxi

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., xx

the past. I believe Palahniuk's stories stand as testimony, not only as a means to challenge normativity regarding gender and categorization, but also to literature and storytelling's ability to connect people through difference.

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